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Old Strategy. 248



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OLD STRATEGY,

OR

RECKLESS ROLL, THE BOY RANGER.

BY OLL COOMES

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OLD STRATEGY

CHAPTER I.

OLD STRATEGY.

NIGHT had fallen black, starless, wild. The purple mountains had lost themselves in the double darkness of night and storm. Nearer, over valley and plain, the low-lying clouds brooded darkly, and the rising wind sighed fitfully, sweeping up the valley, sobbing through the tree-tops, then rushing on, died away in the mountain gorges in peals as of satanic laughter. The lightning quivered in lurid bars along the sky—now leaping in its awful revelry, as it were, from mountain peak to peak—followed by the deep-toned thunder in peals that seemed to shake the earth to its very center.

Down deep in the gloom of the forest that bordered the north fork of the Platte river, near the mouth of the Sweetwater, within the shadow of the Black Hills, a cheery camp-fire was burning. Within its light two men were seated, engaged in conversation. Both were young, scarcely five-and-twenty. One was dressed in the style of garb usually worn by the western hunter, the other in a garb half-civilized and half-savage. The one had dark-brown hair and eyes, a free, open countenance, and a form of strong physical mold. The other had dark eyes, dark hair and dark features, was not so tall as his companion, but heavier set. Both possessed weapons of superior kind and finish.

The place selected by the young men for their camp was beneath a wide, arching tree, well calculated to protect them, in a great measure, from the approaching storm; and in consequence of this partial security they experienced no uneasiness and chatted on quite freely.

"We have every indication of a severe storm, Ralph," said Henry Eustace, the man in the hunter's garb.

"Yes," replied his companion, Ralph Dickens. "But this old pine will shelter us from the rain; and, as to the red-skins, we'll have to trust to our own eyes and ears."

"Well, there are Indians in the neighborhood, certain; but I have no more fear of them than of the road-agents or mail-robbers who have their dens in these hills."

"That's true, Eustace; the robbers are our worst enemies, and wouldn't hesitate to cut a man's throat for the rags on his back. It's lucky that we met to-day; I haven't seen you since last spring when you were up here on a hunting expedition. Haven't been at Harper's settlement for six months."

Henry Eustace turned his head to conceal the sudden flush that swept over his face, as Dickens concluded his last sentence.

Ralph continued, as Henry made no reply:

"I presume the settlement has improved since then; I know our place has more than doubled in its number of settlers in that time."

"Yes, several families have been added to Harper's settlement this summer," said Henry.

"I guess I'll come down to your settlement before a great while and spend a few days with you, Henry. Just think how unsocial we've been. Known each other for five years and live only fifty miles apart, yet see each other but once or twice a year. But, by the way: how does Roland Rashleigh and Edna Harper get on? Heard once they were married. Any truth in the story?"

"Not a whit" replied Eustace, trying to hide his embarrassment. "The report has reached our settlement that Rashleigh is the leader of a regular band of robbers, and it is partly my business up here to inquire into the matter. If so, the next time he visits our place he will be arrested."

"Ha! ha!" laughed Dickens. "That's a good one on Roland, for all he's as innocent as I am."

And so the conversation drifted on between the two men for some time; and all the while the storm-cloud came trooping up from the north-west like a misshapen piratical craft. The lightning flashed brighter, the thunder rolled

nearer and the wind roared louder. Presently the rain began to fall in great drops that sounded like hail as it rattled down among the leaves.

The conversation of the two men now ceased. Henry Eustace wrapped a gum blanket around him, and then stretched himself at the foot of their sheltering tree upon the ground, using his saddle to support his head. Ralph filled his pipe with tobacco, lit it, and, rifle in hand, began pacing to and fro near the fire—performing the duty of guard while Eustace slept.

Wearied with his day's ride, and lulled by the steady roar of the elements, Henry soon fell asleep. How long he slept he knew not, but presently he was aroused by a slight noise. He arose to a sitting posture and gazed drowsily about him.

Was that reality that met his view? Surely not. He rubbed his eyes and bit his lip to assure himself that he was not dreaming. Yes it *was*. He could not drive the horrible sight away. There, before him, with leering and diabolical faces, stood five grim, stalwart and hideous savages!

Ralph Dickens was nowhere to be seen.

For a moment Eustace seemed paralyzed by the presence of the savage demons standing there so grim and silent, each clutching the haft of a knife. But, he was not long in coming to a true sense of his situation. Whether dead or alive, Ralph *was* gone and he was at the mercy of the savages. Quickly the questions flashed in his excited mind:

"What was Ralph doing away? Why had the savages not murdered him in his sleep?"

No definite answer was suggested to his mind. He could not harbor the thought that Ralph was in league with the Indians, and had betrayed him, yet there was something wrong.

Henry Eustace was brave to desperation. He had often contended with as many savages as stood before him in a hand-to-hand encounter, and had proved the victor. Thoughts of resistance now entered his mind. He felt for his knife and pistols, but, alas! they were missing from his belt.

"He! he! pale-face sleep heap *sound*," said one of the savages, in bad English, as he read Henry's disappointment in not finding his weapons in his belt.

Indignant with rage at the savage, who emphasized his last

word by giving the young hunter a severe kick, Eutace sprung to his feet with the quickness of a tiger, and, snatching a tomahawk from the hand of the savage, dashed it into his tufted head, cleaving it to the neck.

The other savages now closed in upon the young hunter with a frightful yell. Placing his back against the pine, Henry determined to sell his life dearly. Swinging the tomahawk aloft, he brought it down upon another tufted skull. Then again he raised it and aimed at the head of another savage, but the latter escaped the blow by springing aside, and the tomahawk flew from Henry's hands several feet beyond his reach. He was now completely at the mercy of the three remaining red-skins, who instantly sprung toward him with uplifted tomahawks to cut him down; but, at that instant, a blinding stream of lightning seemed to leap from the edge of the weapons, and savages and their intended victim fell to the earth—stricken down by the hand of God.

Still the storm raged on with unabating fury. The camp-fire burned lower and threw a dim, sickly light over the ghastly scene of death. But see!

Out from the darkness of the storm and woods, into the dull light of the camp-fire, issue a man and a dog. Pausing within the circle of light, the man views the scene of death before him, with a half-solemn, half-triumphant expression upon his face.

Let us try to describe him as he stands revealed in the light of the camp-fire.

He is a man of perhaps forty years of age, tall and erect as the majestic forest oak, without a physical defect in form or feature. Broad-shouldered, deep-chested and lithe-limbed, he is the personification of health, strength and activity. His hair and whiskers are dark. The former is cut close to the head, the latter hangs low upon his breast, with the growth of years. Complete manhood is clearly marked in every feature. In the full and rolling lips, affection is strongly portrayed; dignity, decision, authority, perseverance and courage are portrayed in the dark, flashing eyes, the nose, the expression of the mouth, as well as in the pose of the head.

He is dressed in a neat-fitting suit of buckskin breeches, shirt and moccasins, while around his shoulders and hips he

wears capes of undressed fawn-skin, finished off around the edges with bright yellow fringe. His head is surmounted by a close-fitting cap that bristles with innumerable numbers of small, polished steel spikes, some three inches in length, and sharp as thorns, while in the toes of his moccasins the sharp claws of some wild animal are dextrously fixed. In addition to the long, bright rifle he carries, a brace of pistols, a long knife and a side-tomahawk are suspended in the highly-ornamented belt that girdles his waist.

Such is the appearance of Sol. Strange, or Old Strategy, as he was more familiarly known upon the western plains, a scout, a hunter, a trapper and guide, acknowledged, by all who knew him, to have no superior.

The soubriquet of Old Strategy was given him, not on account of his being an *old* man, for he was just in the prime of vigorous manhood, but from the fact that he possessed a peculiar and natural shrewdness in circumventing the red-skins, possessed by few of his calling.

To the red-man Old Strategy was a bitter and unrelenting enemy; to the honest white man a warm and steadfast friend, while both termed him an eccentric and living curiosity.

The savages believed that he was possessed of two spirits, one of which dwelt in the waters, the other in the air, and that neither could be destroyed in the absence of the other. Thus believing, and in order to distinguish him from others of their enemies, they gave to him the name of White Spirit.

The dog which stood at the scout's side was a cross between the bloodhound and the wolf. His hair was gray and shaggy like the wolf's, his ears were large and drooping like the hound's.

For years this dog had been the constant and daily companion of Old Strategy, and to his keen instinct was owing much of the scout's success in stalking the deer and trailing the savage.

Gazing at the prostrate forms before him for a moment, Old Strategy crossed his arms over his breast and gave utterance to the odd exclamation:

"Holy horrors o' Gotham!"

For a moment he continued to gaze at the motionless forms, then he turned and addressed his dog:

"Sagacity, old boy, we're too late. Babylon's fallen, and I see cl'arly that we'll spile for a fite with the reds. However, the lucky dogs that wiped out these 'ere reds haven't done thar work up systummatikul, for nary a skulp have they lifted. But we kin do that, Sagacity; we kin do that, old boy."

So saying, the scout drew his knife and advanced toward the prostrate forms, but, as his eyes fell upon the pale, upturned face of Henry Eustace, the burning garments of a savage, the melted edge of a tomahawk, he started back with an involuntary shudder and feeling of surprise and inward awe.

"Nary a skulp, Sagacity; nary a skulp, old boy," he said, addressing his dog; "they're stricken down by a lightning-bolt—by the hand o' God, old boy. We mustn't tamper with *His* dead. They're sacred dead, old boy. But—"

He advanced and bent over the form of Henry Eustace, and not until then did he recognize the young man's pale features.

"Ah, young man!" he exclaimed, solemnly, "dead! dead! dead! and stricken down by the hand o' God! Poor Henry! poor Edna!"

He raised the form of his young friend in his arms and placed him nearer the waning camp-fire, upon an Indian blanket. Then he tore open the bosom of his hunting-shirt and placed his hand upon his left breast. A cry of joy escaped his lips as he did so, for he felt the young man's heart beating tremulously.

"Not dead yet, Sagacity; not by a long shot, old boy. Only stunned by the lightning-bolt. Soon fetch him around ag'in."

The scout began to chafe the young man's limbs and temples, holding his head where the rain could fall in his face. His efforts to restore the young man to life were not in vain. Soon Henry opened his eyes and gazed into the face of the scout with a wild, dreamy and unconscious look.

"Where am I?" he faintly articulated.

"Ho! ho! Hank, my boy!" exclaimed the scout; "you're rite hyar, on the sunny side o' thirty years—good as two dead men—'long with Sol. Strange, Spike-head, Old Strategy, White Spirit, or whatever yer a mind to have it—it's all the same—and here is old Sagacity, jist sp'ilin' to munch t'ae throttle o' a live red-skin."

The jolly voice of Old Strategy had quite a reviving influence upon young Eustace. He soon recovered from the shock he had sustained by the lightning-bolt, and was enabled to sit up. He was greatly surprised to find Ralph Dickens still missing from camp.

In as few words as possible, Henry recounted to Old Strategy his adventure with the red-skins, including the mysterious absence of his friend Dickens. After he had concluded, the scout asked :

"Does Dickens live at your settlement?"

"No. He lives up at Archer's ranche."

"Do you know what he follers fur a livin'?"

"He told me that he was in the employ of Archer."

"Wal, I'll bet he told ye a lie. Young man, ye've been the victim of misplaced confidence. That feller's in league with the Ingins, and it war him that brought them 'ere devils onto ye, and I'll tell ye how I know it."

"An hour or more ago I war seated under a rock over yander, lookin' this way. All o' a suddint I see'd a lite wavin' among the trees, and knowed it war some Ingin deviltry goin' on. Now mark : that war the signal o' yer friend to his Ingin allies, to come over and lend a helpin' hand. He wanted to take you *alive*, too, or he'd never went to so much trouble. Howsumever, I took it under my skulp to come over and look around for a chance at a red, but when the distance war measured I found my game war up. God, in His vengeance, had saved me o' other duty than restorin' ye to life."

"For which I shall ever feel grateful to you," said Henry.

"Jist so ; but I'll tell you, boy, we've got to git away from here. This spot is *marked*, and the fust thing we know we'll be spotted with a bullet-mark. The hills and plains are alive with Ingins on the war-path. The devil has got among them. Jist this morning I see'd a party o' over a hundred movin' in the d'rection o' yer settlement. 'Spect as what we're needed thar this minute, or, at least, we will be afore we git thar."

"Then, for God's sake, let us be off!" said Henry, rising to his feet.

"I am ready," replied the scout.

"But I've a horse out here a short way at grass."

"So much the better for you. I kin walk as fast as you."

horse; bring him around, while I gather up the weapons and hide them."

Henry turned and went after his animal, while Old Strategy busied himself in gathering up the savages' arms.

By this time the storm had cleared away, and now and then the great round moon shone through a rift in the broken clouds that went scudding across the sky.

In a few moments Henry returned without his horse. A look of disappointment was upon his face.

"My horse is gone," he said.

"Nothin' more'n I 'spected," replied the scout. "Yer friend, Dickens, has stole it. However, we can measure the distance with our legs, so let's be off. Come, Sagacity; come, let's be trampin', old boy."

So saying the men shouldered their rifles and plunged into the gloom of the forest.

CHAPTER II.

THE WILD RIDE.

THE course of our friends lay through a wild and broken country.

Deep creeks and ravines, swollen by the recent rains, yawning chasms and roaring cañons intercepted their way at almost every step. Now and then the dusky form of a savage would glide across their path with the silence of a phantom. But, through the scout's perfect knowledge of the country and Sagacity's keen instinct, they were enabled to move on slowly without running into hidden danger.

Several miles had been traversed, when, finally, they came to a large creek, a tributary of the Platte, which was greatly swollen and proved a barrier to their progress. However, Henry Eustace and the scout could not stand still and wait for the water to fall, so they moved along its bank in hopes of finding means to cross.

Sagacity began to show an uneasiness now that convinced

his master that some danger was lurking around. Still using the utmost caution our friends pressed on. Presently they came to where a large tree had been uprooted by the storm, and falling across the stream, spanned it from shore to shore. This our friends concluded to cross the stream upon, though it was quite dangerous, for already the tree was swaying to and fro, and it was liable to break loose at any moment by the force of the rising water and the pressure of the floating debris that was momentarily accumulating against it.

Old Strategy took the lead; the two men and the dog stepped upon the log and began to move across the roaring waters.

At each step the swaying bridge threatened to break loose, but brave, fearless and determined the men moved on. They were more than half way across when their ears caught the soft tread of moccasined feet and the low sound of suppressed voices. Sagacity set up a whining, but, alas, his master knew too well his mute warning. The men stopped upon the log, and that instant four Sioux Indians arose before them on the bank of the creek with triumphant yells; and, with tomahawks upraised to cut them down, they disputed their passage to the shore.

In all his life Old Strategy had never been taken at such a disadvantage by the red-skins. For once he felt himself at a loss to know how to extricate himself and friend from the danger staring them in the face. He dare not lift a hand to draw a weapon lest he should lose his balance and fall into the water. Yet, something must be done, and that speedily, for the creek continues to swell and the log is about to break from its mooring.

Retreat seemed the only practicable mode of escape, but the idea had scarcely entered their minds when three savages appeared upon the other shore, thus cutting off all possible chances of escape to either side, while death by the seething waters seemed inevitable.

"Holy horrors o' Gotham!" exclaimed the scout, in a tone of perplexity. "Things begin to look hazy, Hank, old boy."

"Yes; it's all up with us. The water will do what the savages don't."

"Wal, they say as what thar's hopes as long as thar's life; if so, why—look out, old boy! Stride the log, it's goin'!"

Simultaneously, the scout and Henry dropped astride the log with their legs submerged in the water to the knees. They had scarcely done so, when there came a terrible crash of floating debris: one end of the log broke loose, swung round into the middle of the stream and floated off with our friends upon it, while the savages, with yells and jeers, kept pace with it by following along the banks on either side.

The situation of the two white men was as ludicrous as it was dangerous. Seated face to face astride the floating log, they could do nothing toward escaping. They dare not draw a weapon, lest, ere they could use it, a tomahawk would be buried in their brains.

The savages seemed to know that the pale-faces were at their mercy, and took a fiendish delight in trifling with their fears. Now and then they would hurl a club or stick at them, which required considerable dodging to escape; and besides thus being punished, they were in constant fear, lest the log would roll over in the water, and the immense amount of debris that was still lodged against the upper side would bear them down beneath the waves.

At the moment the log broke loose, Sagacity sprung into the stream, swam ashore amid a shower of bullets, and made good his escape into the forest.

Slowly and steadily the log with its entrapped riders floated on. To the savages, the sport seemed intensely enjoyable, and in their triumph, they berated the discomfited whites loudly on their blindness in stumbling into their trap.

It was no question to our friends why the savages permitted them to drift upon the stream, allowing them to keep possession of their weapons, and why they did not shoot them down without further ceremony since Old Strategy, or White Spirit had been their most deadly enemy. Half a mile further down the creek entered a long and narrow cañon, where the water went rushing through with such terrible force that even logs had been shivered to pieces on the sharp rocks in passing.

With this place an Indian legend was connected.

From the very earliest ages down to the time of which I write, it had been called by the aborigines, Death's Valley. It had been said, and was sacredly believed, that the spirit of an enemy who had been sent adrift, with all his appurtenances

of war, upon the creek, and allowed to be slain by the invisible hand that dwelt within the darkness of the cañon, would never return to haunt their hunting-grounds. Hence the savages' great object in allowing the scout and Henry to drift upon the stream, that they might be dashed to pieces by the great spirit that dwelt in Death's Valley.

Much to the surprise of his companion and the chagrin of the red-skins, Old Strategy produced a short-stemmed clay pipe, loaded it, lit it with a lucifer match, and began smoking as unconcerned as though he had been seated in a border bar-room.

This act of deliberate coolness on the part of the scout proved the means of opening a conversation between the savages and their captives.

"Waugh!" exclaimed a savage, shaking his tomahawk fiercely at the scout. "Dog of a pale-face mus' no smoke!"

"The devil ye say!" returned the scout, sneeringly. "It's none o' yer bisness if I do smoke."

"Mus' no smoke!" reiterated the savage, authoritatively.

"Go to the devil, I say," replied the scout. "I'm runnin' this pipe 'rangement now, and kalkerlate to!"

A few moments' silence ensued, then the savage said:

"Pale-face a heap big blow."

"And seems to me that yer talkin' a good deal outen your mouth for a puke o' an Injin."

"Waugh! White Spirit bad dog. He soon sing nudder tune. Let him listen. He hear the voice at Death's Valley call for him."

"Let her call and be durned. Who keers?"

"Ugh! more brag."

"Looke here, red-skin, I bet ye my skulp 'g'inst yourn that ye'll whistle outen the other corner o' yer mouth afore an hour. Do ye say it's a bet?"

"Pale-face—"

"Hold on there, red-skin," interrupted the scout; "answer my question. Do you say it's a bet?"

"No," jerked out the savage, gruffly.

"Go to the devil then, ye red coward!"

"Waugh! pale-face sleep with eyes open--run into Ingins trap."

"Whew!" ejaculated the scout, "that—that's a cutter, red-skin. I wish now I hadn't sed any thing; howsumever, I *dars* you to say it ag'in."

"Waugh! pale-face sleeps with eyes open—run into Ingins' trap," the savage repeated, with a defiant leer upon his dusky face.

"That's all, red-skin," said the scout, laughing; "I kin remember the words now. *You* may have occasion to hear 'em whistle in yer ear afore long."

"Waugh!"

Here the conversation was concluded. The scout's attention was now fixed upon an object of vital interest that appeared a short distance before them upon the water.

The moon was shining brightly, making every object upon the stream plainly perceptible for some distance, while the savages on each side, not more than fifteen or twenty feet from our friends, could but dimly be seen, owing to the deep shadow of the trees that bordered the banks. But, the object that had attracted the scout's notice, and to which he called Henry's attention, was a large tree, that was partly uprooted or undermined by the water, leaning out *over the stream* at an angle of about thirty-five degrees, and whose long, dark foliage was trailing in the water.

Beneath this tree, through its dark trailing branches, the scout and Henry must pass.

A thought flashed in the quick, inventive mind of Old Strategy the moment his eyes rested upon the tree, and moving closer to Henry he held a short consultation with him in a whisper; then he turned and addressed the red-skins:

"Looke here, red-skins," he said, "hain't you 'uns afeard, that 'em thar limbs will rake us off'n this log and drown us? I sw'ar it's dangerous."

The former spokesman of the red-skins, who was evidently a half-breed, judging from the fluency with which he handled the English tongue, at once replied:

"Must no git off—must lay close to log."

"All right, red-skin; but if we git raked off'n this log, we'll dadge under this floatin' brush and stuff and git away from ye, as sure as yer a born dog."

"Waugh! no git away. Injin too cute. Must stay on

log—go through Death's Valley; then no tr'uble Ingins' huntin' groun' more."

"Jist as you say; if we git drowned afore we go through Death's Valley, it's yer own loss; we won't be 'sponsible for what our spirits do arter we go under."

The savages made no reply, but set up a wild, weird chanting of the death-song of the pale-faces. The sullen roar of the water as it rushed through the narrow and rocky channel of the cañon could be distinctly heard, announcing their close proximity to the legendary Death's Valley. And, of course, a certain amount of singing and chanting must be done; certain ceremonies performed, ere the victims passed through.

But the scout and Henry Eustace heeded not their superstitious orgies. Their eyes, their minds, their very souls were fixed upon the leaning tree and its low-hanging foliage that was trailing in the seething waters.

A moment more and the tree was reached. Under the shadow and depths of the foliage the log and our friends drift. A deep hush falls upon the savages for the pale-faces are lost to their view in the depths of the trailing boughs. And hark! two loud splashes and floundering in the water reach their savage ears—then the floating log and debris drift out from the shadow of the leaning tree—into the bright moonlight.

A yell of baffled triumph escapes the savages' lips, for Old Strategy and Henry Eustace are missing from the log—they are nowhere to be seen. Surely they have been dragged from the log by the drooping branches into the water and borne down by the mass of debris. The savages listen. True enough, *beneath the debris of logs and brush they hear the strangling cries of the unfortunate pale-faces!*

The floating log was scarce a rod below the leaning tree when it swung round and lodged cross-ways in the creek. The savages could not have wished for any thing better. Eager to rescue their drowning enemies that their sufferings might be prolonged, they threw aside their weapons and all together plunged into the creek—climbed upon the log and floating mass and began searching for their perishing enemies, whose strangling noise they could still hear, though it momentarily grew weaker and weaker.

Thus the red-skins were busily engaged in the search, when all of a sudden they were startled by a mocking laugh and the fierce barking of a dog.

Looking up they beheld, to their horror and surprise, Old Strategy and his dog standing upon one bank of the stream, and Henry Eustace upon the other. The scout held in each hand a pistol leveled full at the heads of two savages, while Henry stood with drawn tomahawk, ready to cut the first one own that attempted to spring ashore.

The savages were so stricken with horror, that, for a moment, they seemed changed into wood, and in the language of Old Strategy in relating the circumstances afterward, "The varmints war scart so bad that they turned white as ghosts in dog-days."

"Waugh!" exclaimed the scout. "Ingins sleep with eyes open—run into pale-faces' trap."

The half-breed uttered an indignant grunt, and was in the act of leaping toward the scout when the latter foresaw his intention, and in a firm and convincing tone he said:

"Don't move a step, red-skin, or you're a dead dog. It makes no difference to me whether you sail into Death's Valley alive or not. A dead Ingin's a dead Ingin, and if one o' ye moves a peg, I'll let her slip."

The tables were completely turned. The whites had proven masters of the situation, and seven frightened savages, who but a few moments before had been so loud in their triumph, stood gazing, like beasts driven at bay, at their conquerors.

The manner in which our friends made their escape is easily seen.

In making the passage beneath the leaning tree, they made such a noise and splashing in the water as would lead the savages to believe that they had been dragged from the log by the trailing boughs; then reaching over their heads they caught hold of a large limb, drew themselves upon the tree and allowed the log to pass on. Then crawling along the body of the tree, Old Strategy crossed to one side, where he was joined by his faithful "old boy" Sagacity, while Henry crossed to the other side, thus completely outwitting the unsuspecting red-skins, and drawing them into their own trap.

"I say, red-skins," said the scout. "How d'ye like yer

change? Do ye hear any thing o' the spirit callin' ye at Death's Valley?"

"No!" ejaculated the half-breed, savagely. "Good pale-face must no kill Ingins—Ingins jist in fun."

"Ha! ha! ha!" roared Old Strategy. "That, red-skin, is whistlin' anuther tune, sure enough. So fur's I'm consarned ye may go free, but the devil will soon git ye—his satanic majesty is arter ye at this moment."

"Waugh! pale-face can no lie to Ingin," replied the half breed.

But the words were scarcely uttered when a fearful scream, such as might come from the lips of a demon, was heard, issuing from beneath the floating log and debris upon which the savages stood.

The savages uttered an exclamation of fear and superstitious horror, and like so many frightened fiends, they plunged from the log into the water and struck out for the shores; some of them escaped into the woods, others were borne down by the swift current and dashed to pieces on the jagged rocks in Death's Valley.

Old Strategy watched them in their headlong flight, his sides convulsed with laughter, while Henry Eustace, startled with wonder and sudden fear, stood gazing, rifle in hand, upon the floating debris, expecting each moment to see issue therefrom, the beast or monster that had uttered that frightful scream.

The scout was the first to break the silence that followed the panic.

"I say, Hank, old boy, that was a reg'lur stampede."

"Yes," replied Henry, with some emotion. "But that scream—didn't you hear it?"

"Of course I did, old boy, and it's not the fust time, either. Haven't yer ever hearn o' the voice o' the Hidden Spirit?"

"Often."

"Wal, I kain't 'ccunt fur it in any uther light than that the scream we heard war the spirit's voice."

"Quite a profound mystery. I declare that scream sent a cold chill over me. It was unearthly."

"Ho, ho, old boy; thar's not a doubt in my mind but that other critters besides men and beasts dwell in these hills."

"What do you mean?"

"Ghosts, or goblins, or spirits, old boy."

"I can't agree with you there, my friend. It's impossible. Nevertheless, there is a mystery somewhere."

"Wal, wal, time will tell," said the scout, evasively. "So we mout as well drop the subject and be movin'. We'll have a long tramp afore I find a crossin' place ag'in."

"Very well; I am ready."

So saying, they shouldered their rifles, secured the Indians' deserted arms and set off up the stream again.

CHAPTER III.

THE ROBBERS' RANCHE.

IN the days of the "Pony Express," which all far-western men well remember, the organized bands of robbers for plundering the mails and emigrant trains were quite numerous and powerful, and, despite the vigilance of the military, held almost undisputed sway over various portions of the road. They had a regular chain of "stations" at intervals along the route, located in a wild and secluded spot, with relay-horses to carry messengers from one point to another, with information of an approaching wagon-train, and the probable value of the expected mail. And often these desperadoes derived valuable assistance from the dusky red-men under the leadership of some notorious white renegade, who had been driven from the society of his own race.

At the period of the opening of our story, a substantially built log-cabin, a story and a half high, stood alone in a wild, picturesque dell of the Rattlesnake Mountains, about four or five miles from the National road, which near this point begins its south-westerly swerve through the great passes of the Rocky Mountains. The glen in which the building stood was so secluded, and the path connecting it with the main road so tortuous and poorly defined, that none, not intimately connected with the robber band that made this cabin their headquarters, could have dreamed of its existence while passing the main road.

The cabin had been built back against the face of a perpendicular rock in which the hand of nature had hollowed out a stupendous cavern. This cavern had been selected by the robbers as a store-house for their plunder and ill-gotten gains, and was connected with the cabin by means of a trap-door in the ground-floor of the building.

The time that we would show the readers through this robber rendezvous, is upon the night in which the events occurred as narrated in the preceding chapters.

Let us first look over the lower or ground story. It is a large and spacious apartment, furnished with a single door and window. Rude tables and chairs are scattered over the floor, and weapons of every description ornament the walls. By the open window, rifle in hand, sits a rough, burly-looking man on guard, looking out into the stormy, starless night.

Now let us look elsewhere. We ascend the rude stairs into the chamber. There we cross the floor and rap gently upon a partition door. A soft and musical voice calls out for us to come in. We open the door and enter. We start with wonder and surprise. A fair and lovely, yet delicate woman greets us with a smile. She is young—not more than five-and-twenty—with large and lustrous dark eyes—dark hair, a graceful form, and with features as clearly defined as an ancient cameo. Yet from the depths of her eyes there shines a dull glow that tells us of some secret sorrow resting upon her heart. At her side stands a beautiful child of some four summers, resembling his mother much in features, and who timidly shrinks from our approach. This fair woman and her child are cleanly and neatly dressed, and the atmosphere around them is pure and unconfined. As in the lower room, an oil lamp lights up the apartment and shows us how neat and comfortable the lady's room is furnished. Nothing is wanted to make it pleasant and cozy. Upon a shelf a small library of instructive books are neatly arranged, with which the fair woman may beguile the hours of her incarceration, for it is evident, from her careworn looks, the heavy shutter at her window, which overlooks a wild region or pass known as the Devil's Gate, and the huge iron bolt on the *outside* of her door, that she and her child are prisoners. But, be that as it may, let us leave them for awhile and go down-stairs and enter the secret chamber

The burly man on guard raises a large trap-door, which is dextrously hidden from the eye by a couch of skins, and points us to the dark opening. We descend a pair of stone steps into a dark and narrow passage which we follow along until we come to a heavy door. Upon this door we rap violently once, twice, thrice. A gruff, stentorian voice growls through a wicket, demanding the "pass-word." We answer, "Eureka." The door opens and we stand within the robbers' cave. It is aglow with lights from numerous oil lamps fixed against the rocky walls. For awhile our eyes are dazed by the light that is reflected from the sharp points of the stalactites that point down like fingers of fire from the great dome overhead. Gradually our eyes become accustomed to the light; then we recoil with an inward feeling of fear. Before us, seated at rough deal tables, at cards and dice, are a dozen or more of the robber band, rough, ferocious-looking fellows, armed to the teeth with the most deadly kind of weapons. Clinking glasses, loud words and deep oaths greet our ears. Outcasts of different nationalities are represented in that company of desperadoes. The bushy-browed German, the bearded Californian, the fair-haired Anglo-Saxon, New York gamblers, booted and spurred and reckless Texans and border ruffians—all are there with not a few low-browed, serpent-eyed Indian half-breeds. All about the cavern we see various articles of plunder strewn in promiscuous disorder.

All unconscious of the storm-king's fury without, these reckless men continue their gambling, their oaths and their drinking until they become exhausted with dissipation, and are about to retire for the night, when there came a familiar voice at the door, demanding admittance.

In a moment the door was opened, and a tall man, wearing a slouched hat and military overcoat entered the cavern, his dripping garments showing that he had been out in the rain.

This new-comer into the robbers' ranche was a man of perhaps five-and-forty years of age. He was tall and erect, with a well-knit form and features purely Castilian. Dark hair that hung upon his shoulders, dark eyes that flashed like living fire, an expressive and sensual mouth shaded by a heavy mustache, showed him to be a man of indomitable will, yet of an evil and dissipated character. His movements were as

noiseless as the panther—his steps as firm as the massive tread of the lion.

Throwing aside his hat and overcoat, with a freedom that showed he was at home, a neat-fitting suit of blue velveteen was displayed upon his muscular form. Around his waist was a handsome belt, fairly studded with revolvers and bowie-knives, which gave him the air of a dangerous man.

Thus appeared Roland Rashleigh, or "Reckless Roll," as he was usually called, the robber captain.

"Good-night, captain!" chorused the robbers, as their chief entered their presence.

"Good-night to you all, but a devil of a rough night it's been to me," responded the robber captain.

"A suit of dry clothes and a glass of strong brandy will set you all right. Any news, captain, that—"

"Until I get the clothes and brandy, Joe Ogden, you need ask no questions," the captain replied.

"Very well; here's a dry suit, Captain Rashleigh," called out one of the robbers.

"And here's a bottle of the purest," added another.

"And here's luck to you all," exclaimed the robber captain, seizing the bottle and pouring its contents down his throat at a single gulp.

"Bravo, captain!" shouted his men, as he threw the bottle from him and proceeded to change his dress.

In a few minutes he had donned a dry suit, and throwing himself into a rude, but comfortable arm-chair, he said:

"Now, boys, I'm ready for any question."

"Well, what luck, captain?" asked Zeke Teters, a Texan, with the true ranger swagger.

"Individually, I have had good luck, boys, for the fact is, I have about completed such arrangements as will end my single blessedness in a few days."

"Whew!" exclaimed old Jack Stokes, whose tongue had grown thick with the effect of recent drams of brandy; "then you've rid 'self o' a rival—that strip o' a boy, Henry Eustace?"

"By this time he is on his way to the Indian village," replied the captain.

"That's a good 'un, cap'n, that's a good 'un," ejaculated the

old bacchanalian "S'pose you'll now make a 'pression on that female gal's heart, eh?"

"I will," replied the captain, with a laugh.

"Beats devil, cap'n, how ye 'ceed in b'zness—old Jack Stokes never could 'ceed worth a cuss—never had wife a bit—git one yit—be happy man—how git the boy, cap'n?"

"I employed Ralph Dickens and a party of his Indians to capture him alive, and take him to their village. He left the settlement a few days ago, as a kind of a detective, sent by the authorities at Fort Laramie, to search for the rendezvous of a certain band of robbers whose den was thought to be somewhere in the Rattlesnake Mountains."

"Jist so. Strikes me *I* know somethin' o' that ranche," muttered the talkative Stokes. "But when goin' to settlement after gal, cap'n?"

"To-morrow; and if nothing happens I'll be back in three days. Dickens and two hundred of his Indians will be in the vicinity to assist me in case of necessity. But, really, I had forgotten one thing. Snaky! Snaky!"

In reply to the captain's call, a little half-breed, whose weazen face, small black eyes and wide mouth gave him the appearance of the reptile after which he was named, made his appearance.

"Snaky," continued the captain, "I want you to carry a message to Captain Sherwood, of the Sweetwater ranche, immediately. Can you do it, and not let the grass grow under your feet?"

"He! he! me can that," replied the half-breed.

The captain whirled his chair to a table, and tearing a leaf from a memoranda, dashed off a note with a pencil. Having placed it in the hands of the messenger, who immediately set off on his journey through the storm, the captain arose and left the secret room or vault, and ascended the stairs into the chamber, and entered, without ceremony, the room in which the fair woman and her child were confined.

The child was asleep when he entered, and the mother sitting by the bedside reading.

"Oh! it is you, father," the woman said, laying aside her book.

"Yes, Miriam," responded the robber captain. "Are you sorry that I have come?"

"Oh! no, father, no! I am glad—so glad. Little Harry has been asleep this long time, and I feel so lonesome."

"Well, Miriam," said the young woman's father, "you have now been a widow four years, and I feel anxious to see you married and settled down into a happier life. There is no telling how soon or at what moment I may drop off, and then in case you are alone, you and your child will be thrown helpless out in the world. I am anxious to see you married and living a happier life, and I know of no one who loves you more, and would make you a better husband, than Captain Alf Sherwood."

The eyes of the beautiful woman flashed like fire, and a pallor of indignation swept across her face as her father concluded his remarks.

"Father," she said, in an emphatic tone. "I will take my own life before I will defame the sacred memory of Harry St. Clair, my dead husband, by marrying that villain, Sherwood!"

"Miriam!"

"Oh! father, father! for God's sake have one grain of pity—one spark of fraternal affection for me—your only child! You know that you brought all my sorrow upon me—now don't, for pity's sake, force me to marry that wretch!"

"Miriam, this silliness has gone far enough. You will not listen to wisdom or reason, therefore, I might as well say, first as last, that you *shall marry* Alf Sherwood! I shall maintain you and your brat no longer!"

"Father!" exclaimed the widow, pointing to her sleeping child, "speak not ill of that child. It is Harry's—"

"And for that reason I hate it."

"Roland Rashleigh, you are a monster!"

For a moment the father and daughter stood glaring at each other with flashing eyes, a terrible struggle going on within their hearts. The father was the first to speak.

"Again I say, this silliness has gone far enough. Already I have dispatched a messenger for Sherwood to hasten here immediately. He will bring Father Lucas, the Jesuit missionary, with him to perform the marriage ceremony. You can prepare yourself for the occasion, for I say you *shall wed* Alf Sherwood. Until he arrives, I shall place a guard at your

door and double the lock upon you. This imperative declaration I shall consider sufficient and irrevocable." And with that the robber captain left the room, locking and bolting the door behind him.

In an agony of sorrow, Miriam St. Clair fell upon her knees, and with tearful eyes upraised to heaven, she prayed long and fervently for the Father of all to give her strength and courage for the coming ordeal—to watch over her and her child, and guide them from the darkening shadows of sorrow into the bright dawn of eternal happiness.

How strangely her low, prayerful voice contrasted with the loud oaths and ribald songs of the robber band in the secret chamber below !

CHAPTER IV.

HARPER'S SETTLEMENT

HARPER'S settlement was situated upon the great and beautiful plain that stretches its unbroken length between the Rocky Mountains and Fort Laramie.

A few years previous to the opening of our story, Ambrose Harper erected the first cabin there, for the purpose of establishing a trading-post with the Indians, who at that time were at peace. Mr. Harper was a man of an adventuresome spirit ; had been born and bred upon the frontier, and naturally longed for its excitement and adventure ; and as civilization gradually pushed her conquests west, he was found moving on several years in the advance.

Soon after Mr. Harper settled upon the great plains of Nebraska Territory, he had the sad misfortune to lose his beloved wife. But he was not left alone. Edna, his only child, just budding into a glorious womanhood, proved the source of great consolation, and the only cherished object of his love, beyond the memory of his sainted wife.

In a few years, however, Mr. Harper found quite a number of his friends from the east settling around him, and the prairies being converted into a state of cultivation. Among these newcomers was Henry Eustace.

Not feeling at ease, surrounded by farms on all sides, Harper removed his residence from the settlement and rebuilt, about two miles further west on the banks of a little stream, which was bordered by a thin growth of cottonwood trees. In this new location he had resided with his daughter, about two years at the time of the opening of our story. There Henry Eustace wooed and won his daughter's heart, and there heaven had witnessed the young lovers' betrothal.

On the second night following that of the terrible storm, Mr. Harper and his daughter were seated alone in their cabin, engaged in conversation. The former was scarcely fifty years of age, with some silver among his light-brown locks, yet his form was erect and strongly-built—his movements as free as a man of thirty.

Edna was, perhaps, eighteen summers of age. A little above the medium height, with a plump, round figure, rosy cheeks, nut-brown ringlets and laughing blue eyes, there seemed nothing wanting in making the picture perfect. So, at least, thought all those young Nimrods that called at her father's cabin, and begged in vain for her hand and heart.

A light was burning in the room, showing how neat and comfortable it was kept by the young maiden.

"Edna," said her father, breaking the deep silence that prevailed, "you seem troubled. Is any thing the matter?"

"Yes, father," replied the maiden. "I had a visitor to-day while you were absent—"

"Who, Edna?" interrupted the father, impatiently.

"Roland Rashleigh."

Ambrose Harper started up with the hot blood rushing through his veins.

"And why does that villain's visit here trouble you, my child?" he asked.

"Because he asked me to be his wife, father."

"And you refused him."

"Of course, father. What else could I do?"

"You could do nothing, Edna; but had I been here I would have sent a bullet through the old robber's heart!"

"Then it is well that you were not here, for blood would now be upon your hands."

"It would have been the blood of a murderer, and no crime

would have been done ; but, why do you allow yourself to be troubled about that man ? He is unworthy a single thought."

"I know not why I am troubled, unless it is a premonition of coming danger."

"Oh, fie, Edna—"

Before the father could finish the sentence, the door was dashed violently open and a negro hunter, belonging to the settlement, rushed in, in the wildest excitement, rifle in hand.

"Scip ! Scip ! what's the matter ?" asked Harper, springing to his feet, much surprised at the unceremonious intrusion.

"Oh, good Lor', massa Harper !" replied the excited negro. "de Ingings, de Ingings are comin' !"

"What ? Indians coming ?"

"Yes, massa Harper, dey's comin'—ten millions ob 'em !"

"You're mistaken, Scip ; your'e only excited," said Harper, smiling.

"Lor', no, massa Harper, I's not 'staken—de Ingings am comin'—a whole lot ob 'em."

"How many do you think there are ?"

"Dar's a hundred at least, fur dis nigger counted 'em."

"Hark !" commanded Harper.

All listened in breathless silence, and to their ears was borne the distant report of fire-arms, mingled with the fierce yells of savages.

"Gracious God !" exclaimed Harper, "it is true ! the Indians have attacked the settlement !"

"Yes, massa, and dar's a lot ob 'em comin' here, as true as I's a born nigger. I see'd 'em and hurried on to tell you."

"Oh, father ! we are lost !" sobbed Edna.

"Cheer up, daughter, we must prepare to flee," said the father, but the words had scarcely left his lips when a wild war-whoop announced the near approach of the savages.

"Too late, father ; they are come !" cried Edna.

"Then we must defend ourselves," replied Harper, closing and bolting the heavy door. "Bring my rifle, Edna."

The maiden hastened to one corner of the cabin and returned in a moment with two rifles.

"I can use one, father," she said, handing him his rifle.

"By tigers ! 'spects dar'll be hot time," said Scip, the negro, "but dis chile feels like he could lick de whole caboodle."

"You'll have the chance of trying it," said Ambrose.

"By jingo, massa Harper, dat's what I wants. Dis nigger's boun' to han' his name down to posterior as de terror ob de red-skins for all ages to come— Oh!"

At this juncture there came a violent crash against the door, accompanied by a deafening yell. The attack had begun. For the first time since his residence upon the plains, Ambrose Harper's first struggle had begun with the red-skins.

With great presence of mind Edna sprung and blew out the light, that the savages might not know exactly where to aim their weapons, should they find an opening in the walls.

In erecting the cabin Mr. Harper had left nothing undone in preparing for just such emergencies. The door and the walls were pierced with loop-holes, and as the moon was shining bright without, it would be an easy matter to bring the assailants under range of the rifles of those within.

Again and again the savages endeavored to break open the door, but their efforts were in vain.

"What do you want, out there?" called Mr. Harper, in the Indian dialect.

"Want in," replied a savage.

"What for?"

"Scalps, and white squaw."

"You will not get in, then; and if you don't leave we'll fire upon you."

A mocking laugh followed the old frontiersman's declaration, and at the same time there came another crash against the door that caused the whole building to tremble.

"To your post, Scip, we must fight," said Harper.

"Dat's de talk, massa Harper," said the negro, springing to a loop-hole; "dis nigger'll show sum ob dem Ingings de way de holy prophets went. I'll jis' bet I'll string a dozen ob 'em on a thread ob moonshine, an' punch de whole wid a bullet. Golly! dar's a million out dar, as I's a born nigger—dar! *one* less?"

This last exclamation was caused by the report of a rifle and the death-yell of a savage.

It was Edna Harper who had sighted a red-skin through a loop-hole, and brought her rifle to bear upon him with a fatal effect.

Edna was a brave and noble girl, and, raised upon the frontier as she had been, but few could excel her in the use of the rifle. And now that she was battling for her home, she felt that she was capable of performing deeds of prodigious valor—as other frontier damsels had done in other days, when the red barbarians were thundering at the door of their lonely cabin for their lives.

The light of the moon enabled the besieged to distinguish the moving forms of the assailants quite readily, and as they were within easy range, a savage fell whenever a rifle cracked.

Like the "Maid of Saragossa," Edna continued to load and fire with as much coolness and precision as her father, while Scip, at each shot, would give vent to a triumphant shout, or execute some gymnastic performance, in order to demonstrate the spirit of his feelings.

At each volley from the cabin, the red-skins would recoil in great confusion to the shelter of a fence or an outhouse, but in a few moments they would return to the assault with renewed strength and courage, only for a part of their number to fall before the withering fire of the defenders.

Our friends could still hear, at intervals, the firing and yells at the settlement, and they knew that they would receive no succor from thence—that their salvation depended upon their own efforts.

Ambrose Harper felt certain that they could hold the savages at bay so long as their ammunition lasted and they did not fire the building. He knew too well that the scalping-knife would seal their fate should they give themselves up to the foe; therefore he resolved to struggle on, and if he must fall, let it be with his face to the enemy.

The savages seemed determined to accomplish their undertaking, else they were urged on to the attack by an irresistible power. Their object seemed to be to burst open the door, and to accomplish this purpose, a battering-ram was made by three or four of their party taking upon their shoulder a large log and advancing toward the house, but ere they could reach it, half their number would fall under the rifles of the wary whites. Other savages would immediately fill the place of their fallen comrades, only to meet their fate.

And all the time that this bloody assault was going on, two

persons might have been seen standing in the shadow of a cottonwood tree about fifty yards from the cabin, watching the conflict with a deep interest.

One of these persons was dressed in a peculiar garb of blue velvet, the other in the garb of an Indian chieftain. The one was Roland Rashleigh, the robber captain, the other, the chief of the savages that were besieging Ambrose Harper's cabin.

"I say, captain," said the chief, addressing his companion in pure English, "those whites in the cabin will never be taken alive."

"Bah, man!" replied the robber captain, sneeringly. "They can not hold out another hour longer."

"At this rate, should they hold out *half* an hour longer, my braves will all be slain, and for what?"

"A thousand dollars!" hissed the captain.

"A thousand furies!" returned the chief. "What is a thousand dollars, compared with thirty men?"

"*Men!*" sneered the captain. "Do you call savages *men?*"

"No difference, Rashleigh; men or no men, I will *not* see them all shot down for *you*, nor your thousand dollars!"

"Then you will suffer yourself and thirty brave *men* to be driven away by *three* whites, eh?"

"But they are fortified."

"And you are ten to one."

For a moment the chief was silent, then he said:

"There is but one way, captain, that those whites can be dislodged with the force I have here, and I dare not call away any of my braves from the attack upon the settlement."

"And what way is that?" asked the captain.

"Fire the building."

"It will never do. The whites will suffer themselves to be burnt to death, rather than quit the cabin. I know old Harper."

"Then I will call my men away."

"If you do, I'll shoot you down!" And the robber captain laid his hand upon the butt of a revolver; but heeding him not, the chief placed an instrument to his lips and blew a shrill whistle.

In a moment the remnant of his braves had gathered around them with defeat written upon their faces. Of thirty, sixteen were alive.

"And now," said the chief, addressing the robber. "If you say fire the cabin, well and good; if not, I will withdraw."

"Well, fire it then," replied Rashleigh. "But remember—no girl, no gold."

The chief at once gave orders to fire the cabin, and with renewed courage the savages bounded away to apply the brand.

While the main force held the attention of the whites to the front of the cabin, the others crept around and fired it in the rear.

Like a serpent, the flames crept up the dry walls and over the roof.

The savages withdrew a few steps into the surrounding forest to await the appearance of the defeated pale-faces.

The burning building lit up the surrounding gloom with a glare like the midday sun, and threw a weird light over the demoniac features of the robber captain and the chief, who stood with their eyes fixed upon the cabin door, with a dogged and impatient gaze.

Deeper and deeper into the walls the fire eat. Higher and higher into the air the flames arose. Louder and louder the timbers crackled—denser the smoke grew—faster the sparks flew up into the inky darkness overhead.

The firing of the whites within the cabin had ceased. No appeal for mercy came to the listening ears of the savage demons without—no sound at all, save the roar of the flames, mingled with the wild scream of some startled night-bird.

The moments pass. The cabin is entirely enveloped in the devouring flames. Hark! to that rumbling noise! All eyes—those basilisk eyes peering from the copse—are strained upon the cabin door; but, alas! the building crumbles to the earth, a red heap of coals. Not a cry, not a murmur, told what the fate of our friends had been—not a vestige of their roasting bodies could be seen by those silent figures that move out like phantoms from the shadow of the copse into the glaring light of the burning cabin.

"Roland Rashleigh!" exclaimed the chief, turning to the robber captain with a baffled look, "your victims have perished—the girl is lost!"

"Yes; curse you, Ralph Dickens, and *you* have lost your thousand dollars!"

"Villain, and—"

The renegade did not finish the sentence, for the enraged robber captain dealt him a blow in the face that almost jerked him out of his moccasins and sent him describing a circle through the air.

"That, to lighten the color of your chiefship's phiz," hissed the captain, and turning he glided away through the woods to where a horse was hitched, with a saddle and bridle upon it.

In a moment he unfastened the animal, and vaulting into the saddle, dashed away at a furious speed.

CHAPTER V.

OLD STRATEGY MEETS WITH AN ADVENTURE.

INSTEAD of finding a place where he could cross over the creek and join Henry Eastace, Old Strategy was compelled to give up all hopes of crossing that night, and retreat into the woods, on account of the water which overflowed the banks of the stream and spread out into the bottom some distance.

This was quite a disappointment to the scout; nevertheless, he took it all in good part, and with his dog set off in search of a place where they could pass the night in safety. This they soon found in a kind of a cavern in a rock where an old bear had once had a cosy lair.

Trusting to Sagacity to keep guard, as he had done on many similar occasions, the scout crawled into the cave, and throwing himself upon the ground, soon fell asleep.

He had slept scarcely an hour, when the dark form of a crouching savage glided from around the base of a rock toward the sleeping scout. A knife gleamed in his claw-like hand—a murderous look flashed in his serpent-like eyes.

Slowly on the savage crept, so silent that he was almost in reach of the scout ere Sagacity detected his presence. Then with a howl the faithful dog leaped upon the red-skin, and seizing him by the throat, dragged him to the earth.

Old Strategy was aroused by the noise, and springing up, he crawled to the mouth of the cave to ascertain the cause of all the disturbance.

The light of the morning dawn enabled him to see that the dog was engaged in a desperate struggle with a red-skin.

"Ho! ho! that's it, Sagacity, old boy," shouted the scout. "Shake him—wool him, old boy! Go in, dissect him inter wolf-bait—oh, but yer a jewel—a trump, old boy—can run faster, jump higher, bark louder, smell stronger, and bite deeper, than any dog that ever scratched gravel from a mountain-path, or squeezed the wizen o' a red-skin!"

The struggle was as brief as it was desperate. Sagacity proved the victor, though he had been severely punished by the red-skin's knife.

"Brave old dog," said the scout, patting the noble animal upon the head. "Saved yer master's life ag'in, old boy; but you are hurt, cut, slashed and slathered, old boy, and ye must have yer wounds dressed and tied up. This varmint's blanket will do fur the purpose," and turning about he took the blanket from the dead savage's back.

As he did so, something white fell with a flutter from its folds at his feet. Stooping, he picked it up, and found it to be a paper written upon with a lead pencil. As there was hardly light enough to read it by, the scout thrust it into the bosom of his hunting-shirt, and proceeded to bandage Sagacity's wounds, which he found quite numerous.

It was broad daylight before he had finished his surgical operation, and pronounced Sagacity out of danger. He now drew out the paper, unfolded it, and read as follows:

"September 3d, 18—,
"Rashleigh's Rancho."

"CAPTAIN ALF SHERWOOD:

"DEAR SIR: You will make all possible haste and come here at once. Your marriage with *my* daughter must be consummated at once, or else all may be lost. If I am not mistaken, and I *know* I am *not*, I saw Captain Harry St. Clair in flesh and blood to-day. He is in disguise and may run counter to our

plans. Should Miriam get wind of his existence, the devil will be to pay, and you will die an old bachelor. Come immediately, and bring "Father Lucas" with you to say the words.

"ROLAND RASHLEIGH."

Had Old Strategy been confronted by a visitor from the planet Jupiter, he could not have started as he did upon reading that note. Wonder, surprise, indignation, fear and joy swept across his swarthy face in a moment's time, and for a while it seemed as though some terrible weight was bearing him down.

He read and reread the note several times, then carefully folding it, he placed it in the bosom of his hunting-shirt again.

The scout now turned his attention to the dead Indian, whom he readily recognized as one of the most notorious half-breeds in the mountains, and who, for years, had been a valuable tool in the hands of the mail-robbers.

It was Snaky, the messenger whom Captain Rashleigh had sent, but a short time before, from the ranche with a dispatch to Captain Alf Sherwood.

"Wal, Sagacity, old boy," said the scout, addressing his canine friend, who now more resembled a bunch of rags than a dog. "You don't know what a glorious deed ye've did in splittin' the wizen o' this red. Yer an indispensable jewel, old boy; one thet allers 'll shine inter the busom o' my eye, like the tail o' a flamingo in a mud-puddle. Here, old boy, is sumthin' to take the bad taste out o' yer mouth."

The scout drew from his pocket a few pieces of dried buffalo-meat, and dividing them with his dog, he took up his rifle and commenced retracing his steps to the creek, partaking of his rude breakfast as he moved along.

When he reached the creek he found that it had fallen quite within the banks. Crossing over, he set off on a brisk walk in high hopes of overtaking Henry Eustace. So easily and rapidly did he move along, apparently without any physical exertion of his own, that he seemed to be moving on invisible wings, or impelled by some secret power. Now and then a smile would wreath his face, showing that some pleasant thought occupied his mind, and then, at times, his brow would darken like a storm-cloud, and his hand would wander involuntarily to his belt.

And thus, with the sunshine and shadow of life good and ill sweeping across his mind, he continued on his lonely way, with his faithful and wounded dog at his heels.

Noontide found him threading his course along a tortuous and rocky path, leading up a dark and deep ravine in the Black Hills. Presently he turned aside, and parting some wild sage-bushes, revealed the mouth of a cavern.

"Home ag'in, old boy—home from a foreign shore," the scout exclaimed, as he threw his rifle into the hollow of his left arm and advanced into the cave, closely followed by Sagacity.

This cave was the head-quarters of Old Strategy. Here he had lived alone with his dog for three years, unmolested by the wily red-man, who regarded the ravine in which it was located with a superstitious fear.

The cave was large and roomy, with a small opening overhead that admitted the sunshine, and allowed the smoke to pass out when the scout found it necessary to have a fire.

A couple of wither chairs, some cooking utensils, a pallet of the skins of wild animals, and a shelf with a few time-worn books upon it, constituted the furniture of the apartment.

"Dinner the fust thing, old boy," said the scout, setting aside his rifle.

Going to one corner of the cavern, he took from the wall a slice of dried venison and smoked bear's meat, and dividing it with his dog, he sat down to his dinner and eat voraciously. When he had finished his rude repast he arose to his feet feeling much refreshed.

In a few minutes he was ready to resume his journey toward the settlement again, not, however, before he had carefully washed and dressed Sagacity's wounds.

"Now, Sagacity, old boy," he said, throwing the dog a shoulder of bear's meat, and taking up his rifle. "I'm off fur a long tramp, but you'll have to stay here, old boy, till I come back. Yer health won't admit o' yer goin' out, though I hate most orfully to leave yer behind. But ye jist stay here till I come back an' we'll have a rousin' time. Jist go in, and while away the moments onter thet b'ar's hump. Go back, Sagacity, go back, old boy; I hate to leave ye, but yer health won't admit o' it."

The faithful brute was loth to stay behind, and whined piteously when he saw his master's form receding in the distance.

The scout's course still lay through a rough and wooded country, along the base of the Black Hills, yet he allowed no trivial object to impede his progress.

Two or three hours' brisk walking brought him into a low, level and heavily-wooded valley, where not a breath of air was stirring, and where the sun shone down hot and scorching.

While moving through this valley he was suddenly startled by the "whirr" of a bullet in close proximity to his head, and the quick tramping of moccasined feet approaching him. Turning quickly, he discovered a powerful Indian, with the smoke still curling from his rifle, and upraised tomahawk, rushing toward him.

Quick as the lightning's flash leaves its home in the sky, Old Strategy raised his rifle and fired. With a yell the savage fell dead, but the scout had scarcely time to realize his victory when he beheld, but a few steps away, another glimmering rifle-barrel—along which gleamed a pair of savage eyes—leveled full upon him. Quickly springing aside, the bullet passed harmlessly through the space where he had stood, but in changing his position the scout had brought a large tree directly between him and the red-skin. This, however, he considered no ill luck, as the tree would afford him shelter until he could reload his rifle.

In a minute he had reloaded his piece, and had begun edging around the tree to get a view of the savage, when, to his amusement and surprise, he discovered the tufted head of the red-skin edging around the other side of the tree with a similar object in view, that of getting a glimpse of the scout.

Both sprung quickly back, but they miscalculated the distance and came together so violently that each was thrown forward upon his face. However, neither of them was long in gathering himself up and placing the tree between them again; and then began a series of maneuverings to dislodge each other, unparalleled in the life of Daniel Boone or Lewis Wetzel.

The savage seemed to be acting only on the defensive, and

made few attempts to draw his enemy out, while on the other hand, the scout tried every artifice that his brain could invent, but all to no purpose; the red-skin kept the same distance between them, with as much ease as though the air that intervened between them pressed the savage away as fast as the scout advanced.

Both were afraid to make a sudden dash around the tree for fear of running under a tomahawk, or against the point of a knife, and in case either one attempted to shoot the other, the muzzle of his gun would appear around the tree so far in advance of him, that the other would be out of the way as soon as he got around; consequently it was a game at which both could play with equal success.

Old Strategy at last came to the conclusion that he had met his match, and he could think of no way by which he could throw the savage off his guard, unless it was by opening a conversation with him. This mode of maneuvering, the scout had found, on several previous occasions, was quite a successful one, and he at once put it into force.

"I say, red-skin, this is a purty hot day," he said, in the Indian tongue, of which he was a master.

"Ugh," grunted the red-skin, in reply.

"And I say you're a coward," the scout continued.

"You dam weak squaw!" blurted the red-skin, aiming to show off his knowledge of the English vocabulary of profanity.

"I sw'ar you're a tough cuss, red-skin; you're a reg'lur wind-bag, stump-sucker and pole-cat combined."

"You pale-face dog."

"Say, red-skin, w'at ye doin' 'round thar?"

"Come see."

"Guess not, red-skin; coolest round he-ar."

"Then stay."

"Wal, I will, but how long 're ye goin' to tread soil 'round thar?"

"Till git scalp."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the scout, as an idea flashed in his mind. "I'll bet you my gizzard ag'inst yourn that you don't."

"Good!" ejaculated the red-skin.

The scout drew his hunting-knife from his belt, and stooping over, he cut a tough switch that grew at the root of the tree, about five feet long. Then replacing his knife in its sheath, he took the switch in one hand and his tomahawk in the other, and raising upon his tip-toes to gather force, he brought the switch a furious cut around the tree about the height of the savage's shoulders.

A cry of pain, such as might have been uttered by a wounded panther, escaped the red-skin's lips. As the weather was extremely hot, the savage wore no other garments than a loin-cloth, consequently, his naked back was exposed to the full force of the blow.

"Say, red-skin, what's the ticket 'round thar? Enny thing up, eh?"

"Waugh! shut mouth," replied the savage, with a groan.

"Did yer dad ever give ye a switchin' when ye's a boy, red-skin?"

"No," replied the red-skin, still unconscious from whence had come the sudden and stinging blow.

"Wal, yer a dirty dog o' a red-skin, and I'll hev to warm yer jacket fur ye," whereupon the scout began warping the switch around the tree and the red-skin's naked back and shoulders with such a vim that the switch fairly whistled.

The red-skin set up a prolonged howling that increased in loudness at every stroke; and still to make matters more painful to him, Old Strategy burst into a hearty laughter. This was too much for the the haughty spirit of Mr. Lo, so he turned, with his back in a perfect ridge of welts, and the blood running to his savage heels, and with the swiftness of a deer, bounded away under cover of the undergrowth.

The scout sent a random bullet after him, accompanied by mocking shout, then, reloading his rifle, set off on his journey. But he had proceeded scarce a dozen rods when a yell behind warned him of a new danger.

Glancing back the scout discovered the identical whipped Indian, fuming with rage and anger, accompanied by two of his friends, running furiously toward him. In a moment he brought his rifle to bear upon them, but owing to their dodging, without effect.

Being a swift runner himself, the scout took to his heels

loading his rifle as he ran. The race became one of great interest to both pursuers and pursued, and they were nearly across the little valley or plateau, when the latter discovered that his enemies were fast gaining upon him.

Just before the scout was a dense thicket in which he at once determined to elude the red-skins if possible, if not, he would give them battle.

Continuing on, he had almost gained the edge of the thicket when he suddenly received a stinging blow between the eyes that came near measuring his length upon the ground, and that caused him to behold a galaxy of stars that our astronomers have nowhere mentioned in their works upon the heavenly bodies.

For a moment the scout was certain that his brain had been pierced by a bullet, but he soon had reason to change his opinion for the better, when he became cognizant of a dull buzzing about his ears. He had been stung by a yellow hornet.

"Holy horrors o' Gotham! if that warn't a sockdolager, yellor-jacket, old boy. I'll give my bread-basket for a nest!" exclaimed the scout, rubbing his eyes and plunging into the thicket, "but I'll be skulped and skinned, if ye hain't poked a bright idea inter my head as well as yer cussed javelin, old boy."

The idea presented by the hornet's "javelin" to the scout's mind, was more forcibly impressed by the appearance of a huge nest hanging on a bush but a few steps before him, and a number of the ill-natured little inhabitants frisking about the door ready to pounce upon any intruder.

Quick as thought, the scout darted by the huge hornet-nest, and concealing himself in the thick weeds and brush within a few feet of it, awaited the approach of the red-skins. He had not long to wait, for in a moment they put in their appearance within arm's length of the hornet-nest. At the same instant the scout reached his rifle forward and thrust the muzzle through the frail domicile of the insects.

With a buzzing sound a perfect cloud of enraged hornets glided out of their demolished palace and settled upon the unsuspecting savages—in their hair, in their faces and eyes and mouth and upon their naked backs—causing them to

drop their weapons, and then themselves upon the ground, and roll and squirm and yell in the wildest agonies of pain. And all the while they were undergoing this severest of sufferings, Old Strategy sat within his cover witnessing the turn of the joke in a convulsion of laughter. But, presently, a single stray hornet wandered his way, and giving him a spat with his "javelin" upon the end of his nose, caused him to beat a sudden and hasty retreat settlementward.

"Horrors o' Gotham!" exclaimed the scout, feeling of his nose which immediately began to swell up like a maddened toad. "I'll be busted into the middle o' next year if that cussed rantankerous Wanderin' Jew o' a yellor-jacket hadn't a dozen bearded javelins. I'll sw'ar it won't be long till a feller couldn't tell whether I had a nose stuck onter my head, or a head stuck onter my nose. But thar's one thing sartin, and that is, them 'ere three lilies o' the valley won't foller me fur one week anyhow. Whew! I'll go a land-title in Jarusalem that their hides are fuller o' holes than my old boy, Sagacity, is full o' hairs."

Without further molestation, old Strategy pushed on through the woods, though he momentarily noticed that he was following a larger nose than he was accustomed to.

"Devil take *that* yellor-jacket and *his javelin!*" he would occasionally exclaim, as he trudged along.

CHAPTER VI.

EUSTACE'S RUSE AND RACE.

WHEN Henry Eustace found that Old Strategy could not cross the stream, he concluded to continue his journey alone toward the settlement, for some vague feeling which he could not drive away, forced upon him the belief that he was momentarily needed at home. This belief was strengthened, perhaps, by the mysterious disappearance of Ralph Dickens, whom he had always considered a friend, and his own capture by the red-skins. In all, taking into consideration the story

of the scout's seeing certain signals in the hills, replied to by similar signals near the camp, it was certain that some design was made upon the young hunter's life, through the agencies of others than the savages.

Other visions than those of danger passed through the young hunter's mind, for there is always more or less sunshine and shadow in every heart. There were visions of a happy home, and the smiling faces of a fond old father and mother while down deep in his heart shone the vision of a fair young face—the source from whence sprung all those bright hopes of the future.

Harper's settlement lay fully two days' travel to the south-east, but, pushing forward, young Eustace determined to make the distance, if possible, that night and the following day.

The night passed by and the morning dawned clear and warm with its song of birds; all nature seemed greatly refreshed by the recent rain. But the daylight brought an uneasiness to his peaceful progress.

In the soft, yielding soil he discovered several fresh moccasin tracks, all pointing toward the settlement, and his fears were that they had been made by a party of hostile savages moving upon the settlement; and if so, they would in all probability reach there in advance of him and take the settlers off their guard.

Henry still pushed on faster than ever since he had made this discovery, but as the day advanced he found that he was overtaxing his strength and was fast becoming exhausted, more with hunger than exertion, for he had had nothing to eat since the previous evening when he went into camp with Dickens. However, he determined to press on and trust to fate.

It was about noon, when moving along a dark and narrow defile between two hills thickly covered with stunted pines he found his passage blocked by a large bear seated upon his haunches regarding the young hunter with cool deliberation.

Henry was an experienced forester and knew the nature of the brute before him, and as he did not care about losing any time in contending with bruin for the passage, he began to move slowly backward with the intention of passing around. But he had taken but a few steps when his attention was drawn behind him by the quick and heavy tramping of feet

Turning around, Henry found himself face to face with two fierce, burly-looking men, whom he knew, by their dress and weapons, were robbers, and who were totally unconscious of the presence of the bear.

"Ho! ho! by gor, Zeke!" exclaimed one of the robbers, "here's our game for the captain's thousand dollars!"

"Henry Eustace! as I'm a born Texan!" exclaimed the other desperado with surprise. "Why, I thought Ralph Dickens had him in a nut-shell. I sw'ar he thinks so, ennyhow!"

"No, sir; I escaped from that villain's power," said Henry, showing no surprise whatever.

"Yes, a slippery one, youngster, by the screamin' catamount ye are; but, do ye know that thar's a thousand dollars reward offered for ye by Captain Rashleigh, o' the Rattlesnake ranche?"

"No. Why does he offer a reward for me?" asked Henry.

"Wal, ye stand atwixt the capting and old Harper's gal, and he wants to oust ye; so I don't know but what we might as well hev the thousand as the renegade, Dickens, eh Teters!"

"Sartainly, sartainly, it's all the same to Reckless Roll; so come, trot out here, my boy, and we'll run ye over to the ranche in a jiffy."

"Not a step will I go with you, villains!" replied Henry, preparing himself for defense.

"Wal, by gor, Teters, don't that beat ye! A pale-faced boy telling Zeke Teters and Belzy Trott, two of the best and bravest men along the "route," that he *won't* do so-and-so. Come, now, boy, know ye with whom ye fool?"

"I know," replied Henry, sneeringly.

"Then you know Ezekiel Teters and Beelzebub Trott, two of the best and bravest men along the great National. And ye should know enuff not to talk back to them. Now come, sir, you are our game—jist a cool thousand dollars in you, sir, and no mistake. Come," and the villain advanced with the intention of taking hold of Henry, but the latter withdrew a step and said:

"Villains! if you lay your hands upon me, I will have you torn to pieces!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" roared one of the desperadoes, "hear that, will ye, Belzy? The boy fancies hisself a catamount or a painter!"

At this juncture Henry heard a kind of a scratching sound behind him, and he knew that the bear was either advancing toward them or retreating, and he resolved to outwit the robbers, if possible, by a bold stroke.

Turning and pointing toward the bear—which proved to be moving toward them—Henry said to the robbers:

“Unless you leave here at once I will set my *pet* bear upon you, and make him tear you into shreds!”

“Oh! oh!” exclaimed the worthies, with sudden fear, as their eyes fell upon the advancing bear.

“Going?” exclaimed Henry, following up his advantage.

“Keep him back, Mr. Eustace, for God’s sake keep him back, and we’ll fly!” exclaimed Teters, in a paroxysm of fear.

“Be gone then—back, bruin!” commanded Henry.

The robbers needed no further warning, but, turning, they fled with all possible speed; and the last Henry Eustace saw of the two *brave* men—Ezekial Teters and Beelzebub Trott—they were flying over the hill with the speed of the wind.

Bruin, less obedient than the cowardly robbers, continued to advance slowly up the path, but he showed no disposition of being quarrelsome, and Henry felt no disposition to rouse his anger, so he stepped aside to let the bear pass, but *he* turned aside also. Henry sprung back into the path and rushed swiftly down the defile, and to his horror the bear turned and followed after him in a slow, shuffling trot.

Henry saw that the animal meant him mischief now, so he raised his rifle and fired. The brute uttered a ferocious howl and rushed on with increased speed.

The young hunter was now in a precarious situation. Almost exhausted with fasting and mental excitement, he could make but slow progress through the obstructing undergrowth while the bear, maddened by his wound, went crashing through it as though it was but grass.

On—on they fled. Momentarily the bear gained upon the young hunter. He could hear his heavy footfalls and quick, irregular breathing, so close was he. Suddenly a score of rifles peal out and the bear rolls dead upon the ground, while Henry, overcome with exhaustion, falls fainting to the ground and into the power of a score of savages that had been waiting in ambush for him.

CHAPTER VII

THE FUGITIVES IN THE FOREST.

CURSING and fuming with rage, Ralph Dickens, the renegade chief, gathered himself up, and would have wreaked a terrible vengeance on the author of his blacked eye, had that worthy not been missing. As it was, however, he pacified his spirit by giving vent to a string of revengeful oaths, then went out and mingled with his braves, who were standing about the ruins of Ambrose Harper's cabin.

The chief addressed his braves in a few encouraging words—made them promises that he would never fulfill—told them things that were not true, and revived their spirits pretty generally.

In a short time all their dead had been buried, their wounded gathered up, and they were moving away from the scene of their disastrous defeat.

Scarcely had the savages disappeared in the forest on one side of the burning cabin, than three persons glided from the forest on the opposite side into the glaring light.

They were Ambrose Harper and his daughter, and Scip, the Black Hunter, as he was most generally called.

In building his cabin, Mr. Harper had dug a subterranean passage from under the floor of his cabin to the banks of the little stream a few yards distance; and through this secret passage, the three had made their escape from the burning building, out into the shadows of night.

Tears were in Edna's eyes as she looked upon the ruins of her home, yet she did not murmur against fate, but felt thankful to heaven that they were so fortunate as to escape with their lives.

The question now was, where they should go to for safety. The firing at the settlement was still going on, and they knew from the confusion that it was being closely besieged by a large number of red-skins. Consequently, it would be useless to attempt to seek safety there, even should they run the gauntlet of the assailants.

Their only course was to flee to the mountain fastness, and remain there until they could have time to go elsewhere. To Mr. Harper this seemed the most feasible course, and they at once resolved to set off on their journey.

They had proceeded but a short distance when Mr. Harper came to an abrupt halt and said :

"Edna, our friends are being sorely pressed by the red-skins at the settlement, and it seems as though I am doing them an injustice by going away."

"I am sure, father, that if either you or Scip can render our friends any assistance, you may go, both of you. I can go alone to the cave in Bear's Hill," the brave girl replied.

"No, no, Edna, that would never do, my dear girl. If Scip will go with you, I will return and assist the settlers."

"I's de chile, massa Harper, dat'll die before harm shall come to miss Edna," said the Black Hunter. "Ye needn't be 'fraid to trust her with old Scip, for he knows every hole an' corner in de Black Hills."

"Then you may accompany Edna to the cave in Bear's Hill, and if the settlers succeed in driving the savages away before morning, I'll come after you to-morrow. In case I should not come to-morrow, the next day you had better set off for Archer's settlement and I will join you there in a few days. Go, and may God speed you."

So saying Ambrose Harper took up his rifle and moved away toward the besieged settlement, while Scip and his fair charge wended their way toward Bear's Hill.

Their journey lay through the forest, and although the moon was shining brightly, the deep shadows of the trees made it pitchy dark, and it was only by holding on to the Black Hunter's arm that they were enabled to keep together.

The Black Hunter was a shrewd and cautious backwoodsman, and as they moved along his eyes and ears were never off their guard. Several times he imagined that he heard the soft, panther-like tread of a savage moving along in advance of them, but with his rifle resting in the hollow of his left arm, he pressed on, ready for any emergency.

Suddenly, as they were passing through a darker portion of the forest, they were startled by the whizzing of a tomahawk through the air in close proximity to the Black Hunter's head,

and the next moment the darkey found himself upon the ground struggling with a red-skin.

It was evident that the savage had aimed his tomahawk at the head of the negro with such force that, missing his mark, the tomahawk flew from his hand, and the impetus of the intended blow carried, or pitched the red-skin forward against the negro so violently that both fell to the ground.

Over and over the combatants rolled in the dark, neither of them uttering a sound nor a word. It was a struggle in which the participants were equally matched—neither of them gaining any advantage over the other. But, suddenly, the Black Hunter, in rolling over, felt his antagonist melt, as it were, from his grasp, and reaching down before him, he grasped nothing but the empty air. With a feeling akin to horror, he realized that he was sitting upon the brink of a deep chasm, up from whose depths came the death-groan of the unfortunate Indian.

For a moment the darkey had forgotten Edna, and when his thoughts recurred to her, he sprung to his feet and spoke her name. But there was no response.

He spoke louder, then he shouted, but only the dull echoes of his own words came back to his ears.

Edna Harper was gone.

"Oh, Lor'! Lor'! whar is ye, miss Edna?" exclaimed the negro, gliding hither and thither through the darkness in a paroxysm of rage and sorrow. "Oh, Lor', dis nigger's repeta-shun's ruined, shuah!"

For fully an hour the Black Hunter sought in vain for Edna, or some trace that would lead him to the true knowledge of her fate. Then he sat down and scratched his woolly pate and mumbled for some time about his lost reputation, and then finally he arose to his feet and set off through the forest in high hopes of running across Edna, who, after all, might have got scared and run off while he was engaged with the savage.

But, hours of search proved unrewarded, and by this time it had grown late in the night and the negro resolved to seek some place of safety and rest until morning when he would resume his search for Edna.

Turning his face toward the south-west he set off at a rapid pace, and presently he halted upon the banks of the Platte river, which he found much swollen by the late rain.

Just before the negro, and leaning out over the river almost parallel with the water's surface, was a large cottonwood tree that had been partly uprooted by the water's motion.

Crawling out upon this tree, the Black Hunter ensconced himself among the thick branches and foliage with the purpose of spending the remainder of the night.

Above and below him the broad river lay bathed in the light of the moon like a bed of molten silver, and every object upon its surface was visible for some distance, unless it was along the shadow of the banks.

However, but few minutes had elapsed, when the negro discovered a dark object, resembling a bunch of brush, floating out from the shore into the middle of the stream about two hundred yards below. This object became stationary when it reached the center of the stream, and then it was immediately followed by another and another, until a dark chain of brush spanned the river.

Shortly after making this discovery, the negro happened to look up the stream, when to his surprise he beheld a dim, blue light waving to and fro among the tree-tops at the distance of half a mile away. This, he knew, was an Indian telegraphic dispatch, but its import he was unable to read, yet he knew that it boded somebody no good.

While he was engaged in watching the moving light with a deep curiosity, he was suddenly startled by the light dip of an oar, and peering through the thick foliage of the tree, he faintly discerned a canoe, containing two occupants, moving down the river in the shadow of the east shore, and it would pass directly under the tree where he was concealed.

Cocking his rifle for instant use, the Black Hunter awaited the approach of the canoe, in breathless silence.

CHAPTER VIII.

EDNA'S ADVENTURES.

LET us now return and look after Edna Harper.

The moment that the Black Hunter and the savage rolled to the ground in each other's grasp, a blanket was thrown over Edna's head, and the next instant she felt herself lifted in a pair of strong arms and borne swiftly away.

She endeavored to cry out, but the heavy fold of the blanket completely stifled her voice. She struggled hard to free herself, but her efforts were as puny as an infant's in the hands of her unknown abductor.

After she had been carried some distance, she was placed, half-suffocated, upon the ground, and the blanket removed from her head. She raised her eyes and gazed at her captor. To her dizzy senses he appeared a monstrous giant—tall as the trees around them.

The giant saw that the maiden did not recognize him, and looking down into her lovely face, upon which the moon was shining through an opening in the trees overhead, and in a tone of admiration, he exclaimed:

"Beautiful!"

Had an adder stung her to the heart, Edna could not have started with such a feeling of utter hopelessness in her heart as she did upon hearing that voice. All her courage seemed to desert her and a dull faintness came over her.

It was the voice of Roland Rashleigh, the robber captain.

A grim, triumphant smile rested upon his features, a savage light flashed in his eyes.

"So I have you at last, Miss Edna," the robber said, after few moments' silence.

At once, all the quick and bitter fire of her womanly nature was aroused. No fear, no humiliation blanched her face now, but a hot flush suffused her brow and her eyes flashed with indignation.

"Wretch!" she cried, clinching her little hand, as if to

give emphasis to her words or strike the villain down. "Why is it that you treat me thus?"

He smiled bitterly, and replied:

"I should think you would know. Because I am determined that you shall be my wife."

"Then you are determined upon that which will never be!" Edna replied, haughtily.

"I thought so once to-night, when your cabin burnt down, Miss Edna, for I was sure you perished in the flames. It is yet quite a mystery to me how you escaped, and had you not returned into the light of the burning building after the Indians left, I would never have known that you escaped at all. As it was, you were seen by a lurking red-skin, who apprised me of the fact, and in company with him, I set out to follow you and your sable escort—"

"Following like a blood-hound!" sneered Edna.

"Just as you prefer, miss," Rashleigh replied. "But one thing is certain, and that is, that you will regret that you refused my avowal of love to-day."

"Never!" Edna fairly hissed. "I am mistress of my own life if not my body!"

"I admire your courage, Miss Harper, as well as your beauty, yet you know not with whom you have to deal. Had you accepted my suit when I sought your hand, Harper's settlement would never have been molested, and you might have led a different life; now you shall be the unwilling bride of Roland Rashleigh, the robber captain."

"Quite a distinguished gentleman you are," Edna replied, sarcastically. "Indeed, it would be quite an honor to be the willing bride of a robber, was one certain that they would not be made a widow within the year through the instrumentality of the *halter* of justice."

"I have no fears of what you call *justice*, Miss Edna, or—"

"Have you no fears of God?"

The robber captain was fairly silenced by this question. It recalled dark crimes and evil deeds to his mind—crimes and deeds for which, sooner or later, he knew heaven's vengeance would punish him. To one it would have seemed that, for that moment, Edna was the captor, and could she have re-

proached him with all his wickedness he would have fairly groaned under the staring accusations, for at heart he was a base-born coward.

After a few moments' silence, he rallied his usual bravado-spirits, and said, evasively :

"From an avowed purpose, I never allow myself to be turned by any fears whatever, Miss Edna."

"Do you propose talking here all night?" Edna asked, abruptly changing the subject.

"No, my impatient dear ; I expect to be fifty miles from here before daybreak. I have two horses just a few steps from here which we will ride. You see I have come prepared for this occasion ; and now, as you seem quite anxious, we'll be off."

So saying, the robber captain seized Edna by the arm, and led her to where two horses were hitched, pawing the earth impatiently.

Assisting the maiden to the back of one of the animals, Rashleigh mounted the other, and for fear that Edna might attempt to escape upon her horse, *he took the reins and led it*, moving away toward the north.

Their course lay through forest, over a wild, broken region, yet the robber captain seemed perfectly familiar with the way and galloped on at a goodly speed.

Edna was an accomplished rider, and found no difficulty in keeping herself easily and gracefully seated upon the animal's back.

Rashleigh talked on incessantly, but the maiden replied, only now and then, in monosyllables. Her mind was busied with other thoughts than of being the wife of the robber captain—thoughts of her father and the Black Hunter, of Henry Eustace, her lover, and even thoughts of escape were strongly entertained in the brave and noble girl's mind.

At heart Edna was sad, but her pride of spirit and courage prevented her from revealing her feelings by her words, to the robber, whose sole conversation was in attempt to humble her spirit and soften her sarcastic and defiant mood. But as well might he have attempted to silence the fury of a storm.

For hours they continued on—sometimes at a breakneck speed, and sometimes in a slow walk. It was pitchy dark be

neath the forest trees ; so very dark in places, that one of the riders could not distinguish the outlines of the other at two yards distance.

Presently a small opening in the forest, where the moon shone down in dazzling splendor, was reached.

That he might gaze for a moment upon the features of his beautiful prisoner, Rashleigh drew rein, and without turning his head, exclaimed :

"What a beautiful and romantic spot is this, Miss Harper !"

There was no response.

The villain turned his head, and as he did so, a terrible oath escaped his lips.

Edna Harper *was missing from her animal's back !*

In a paroxysm of rage and disappointment, Roland Rashleigh ground his teeth and cursed his luck, cursed himself, Edna, and even the dumb brutes that he rode and led. He was the true picture of a baffled and enraged demon.

For fully five minutes he sat and swore, then he dismounted, and leading the animals to the edge of the "romantic spot" he tied them to a tree, and started back along the course they had come in hopes of finding his lost prize.

Scarcely had his footsteps died away in the distance, ere the form of Edna Harper glided out from the shadow of the forest into the opening.

A smile of triumph was upon her face—a resolute and determined gleam in her eyes.

But a few rods from the point where the robber captain emerged into the opening, she had made her escape. While passing under a wide-branching tree, she threw her hands above her head, and catching hold of a limb, held on to it until her horse had passed out from under her ; then, with all her weight upon it, the limb bent gradually down until her feet touched the ground, and she was free again.

The maiden had not thought of this plan of escape a minute before she put it into execution ; and perhaps she would not have attempted it at all, had it not been a feat which she had often performed before in her childhood days, when she was the mistress of a gentle old horse, upon which she would ramble through the forest, often climbing from the faithful

brute's back into trees or swinging off by a limb. Little did she dream then, that her childish amusements and wild ramblings were practical trainings that would be useful to her in after years.

Crossing the opening to where the enraged captain had hitched the horses, Edna unfastened them, and mounting upon the back of one, and leading the other, she dashed away into the forests' shadows just as Roland Rashleigh, defeated and outwitted, made his appearance in the opening again, foaming with rage and savage threats.

"Curses on that girl, she has beaten me at last!—stolen, or rather *taken*, my horse right out from under me! But, I'll be even with you yet, miss!" and he shook his clinched fist in the direction she had gone.

Edna, highly pleased, and yet surprised at her bold feat in outwitting the robber captain, dashed on at a rapid speed until she felt she was beyond his reach; then she reined the animals to a walk, that she could more definitely consider the course she was pursuing. But she had been changed around so often without making any note of the fact in her confused mind, that she found she was completely bewildered. However, she pushed forward again, determined to allow the robber no possible chance of finding her again, and in hope of finding some place of safety.

As the night advanced and the moon sunk lower and lower, a double darkness seemed to come over the forest, and it was only by trusting to the instinct of the animals that Edna could guard against danger by plunging down some steep declivity or into some yawning abyss.

A deep silence pervaded the forest, and as Edna rode on beneath its leafy arches, not a sound came to her ears save the steady trampling of her animals' feet, and now and then the startled scream of a night-bird. Once, however, she was sure that she heard the soft, panther-like tread of a savage, and the animal that she was leading became almost unmanageable, but from what cause she was unable to tell, for the pitchy darkness hid even the animal from view.

Presently she emerged into an open plain where she was enabled to see quite distinctly. Drawing rein, she gazed about her, and as she did so, she uttered a shriek of horror,

and jerked her animal back almost upon its haunches, for upon the horse that she was leading, *was seated a grim, hideous-looking savage*, with a fiendish smile upon his dusky face.

In an instant Edna sprung to the ground and attempted to escape back into the forest, but another savage emerged from the woods at this juncture and seized and dragged the poor fugitive back to the horses. She was immediately replaced upon her horse and a cord placed around her waist, to prevent her from escaping in the dark as she had done from the robber captain, and placed in the hand of the mounted savage, who, leading her animal, set off toward the Indian village, where they arrived near the close of the following day.

Edna was placed in a small lodge prepared for her reception, and there, tired, hungry and discouraged, she burst into an agony of tears. She had been driven to the furthest extremity of hope and fear—nature had been overtaxed, and she gave up all future hopes in despair.

Alas, poor Edna!

CHAPTER IX.

OUTWITTING THE RED-SKINS.

WHEN Henry Eustace returned to consciousness again, he found that he was being carried along upon a stretcher by four savages, while in front and behind several others were walking.

How far they had gone since his capture, and whither they were taking him, the young hunter was at a loss to know, but still feigning unconsciousness, he permitted himself to be carried along by the savages—who seemed to know that he was overcome by sheer exhaustion, and who seemed anxious that his life should be preserved for some future purpose—that he might not be subjected to any immediate hardships while his strength was so greatly reduced.

As the shades of night drew near, the savages went into camp, and not until then did Henry Eustace allow his captors to know that he regained his consciousness.

A fire was struck and some venison roasted and given the captive. He ate voraciously, and after he had finished he felt greatly refreshed, and began to reflect upon his situation.

In the mean time, the savages were holding a council as to the disposition that should be made of the white man. Some were in favor of immediate execution; others, of carrying him to the village and there giving him up for public torture.

The night passed slowly away, and the following morning the savages set off with their captive toward the north-west. Their course lay through a rough, mountainous region of the Black Hills; consequently, their march was slow and toilsome.

An hour before sunset they camped upon the banks of the Sweetwater. Shortly after they were joined by a party of three savages, the only survivors of the seven upon whom Old Strategy and Henry Eustace had so gloriously turned the tables on the night of the storm near Death's Valley, and who readily recognized Henry with a gleam of vengeance in their eyes.

Another council was now held, and by a majority of *three*, Henry Eustace was doomed to die at sunset, by the scalping-knife and tomahawk.

The captive was taken and bound hand and foot to a large tree, that stood about two rods from the river-bank, with his face toward the stream.

The young hunter was too well versed in the nature of the savage, to show so much humiliation as to ask for mercy. He knew that his petitions would be regarded as a mark of cowardice, and would only add to the severity of his torture.

Like a brave man he determined to meet his fate without a murmur, and like a Christian martyr, he commended his soul to God.

To die at sunset!

Oh, how he watched the fast-declining sun! Never before had it shone forth with such radiance as now, and yet its going down was to mark the sunset of his life. Thoughts of the past, sad and happy, came crowding upon his confused mind. He thought of his old parents who would watch for his com

ing in vain, and of Edna, and then his heart seemed bursting with grief.

To die at sunset !

The minutes were gliding by, and the blood-red orb hung low upon the horizon. Already the grim executioner with his gleaming knife stood by Henry's side with his arms folded across his throbbing breast, and his eyes fixed motionless upon the blue mountain-range that would hide the sun from the view of the captive for the last time on earth.

Fervently Henry prayed to heaven for mercy, anxiously he gazed up and down the river in hopes of seeing some one that could succor him—deliver him from a premature death.

As the moment for the execution draws near, the savages gather around the captive, chanting a wild, weird death-song, and flourishing their tomahawks frantically about the captive's head.

To die at sunset !

The moment has come. The sun is down. The executioner turns and advances toward the captive.

But hark !

Out upon the evening air floats a sound—the sound of a human voice.

The execution is forgotten for that instant, and all eyes are turned up the river whence came that voice.

Suddenly all are startled, for around an abrupt bend in the river floats a canoe at the will of the current. In the drifting craft is seated, or rather lounging, a man, who, with his elbows resting upon the rim of the canoe, and his chin resting in his palms, is looking unconsciously out toward the opposite shore, and is singing in a clear and mournful voice :

“ Down the river, down the river
Of Time we float,
Down the river, down the river
In Life's frail boat :
At the helm stands an angel,
Wearing a celestial crown,
Sent by God to guide our life,
In the current floating down,” etc.

Henry Eustace heard the voice, and saw the reclining form of the boatman with a mingled feeling of joy and fear.

The voice, and what he could see of the man's form, he recognized as Old Strategy's. There was the undeniable and

renowned spike-cap, the peculiar fitting hunting-shirt and yellow-fringed cape of the scout.

In an instant a profound silence fell upon the savages. They seized their rifles and crouched low in the tall buffalo-grass, to wait the near approach of the dreaded "White Spirit," whose name had already passed from mouth to mouth.

Henry saw the imminent peril of his friend, and was about to cry out and warn him of his danger, when a savage, seeming to define his intention, placed the muzzle of his rifle against the captive's temple, enjoining silence at the risk of having his brains blown out.

There was no alternative but to obey, but Henry was perfectly surprised, even shocked at the carelessness of the scout in thus permitting himself to drift into the power of the savages.

Slowly the canoe drifted on. The form of the boatman never moves, yet his voice rings out over the water, nearer and clearer in its life-song, yet no music is there to charm the savage breast.

Suddenly the signal is given for all the savages to fire, and simultaneous a score of rifles peal out.

Henry closed his eyes to shut out the horrible sight, yet he could not close his ears to the awful death-groan that came from the lips of the thoughtless and careless boatman.

For many months past, the greatest object and desire of every Indian in the region of the Sweetwater, had been to secure the post of honor offered by his tribe to the one that would take, and deliver at the village, the scalp of Old Strategy, or White Spirit. And now that he had drifted into their power, and lay dead in his canoe, a desperate struggle or race was made for the prize.

Leaving Henry without even a guard, every savage plunged excitedly into the river, and struck out for the coveted scalp of their enemy.

But scarcely had the foremost savage reached the canoe than a yell of baffled triumph escaped his lips, for it was *not* the lifeless body of the White Spirit that lay therein, but the body of their white chief, Ralph Dickens, disguised in Old Strategy's clothes. And, to still add to their surprise and horror, a mocking laugh greeted their ears, and, looking toward the

shore whence it emanated, they beheld Old Strategy, well and alive, and Henry Eustace free at his side, standing upon the bank with their rifles leveled upon 'hem.

Determined to make still another effort toward the capture of their terrible enemy, the White Spirit, and the recapture of the young hunter, they started toward the shore with a yell of rage, but, at that instant, an unearthly scream seemed to issue from the water in their very midst. Panic-stricken, they turned and fled toward the opposite shore—that hideous screaming still continuing in their midst.

In a moment not a single savage was to be seen, and Old Strategy and the young hunter were out of danger once more.

“I say, Hank, old boy,” the scout said. “Thet war a clever trick I played them reds to save yer skulp.”

“Yes, indeed, replied Henry, somewhat agitated. “But I must admit that I am at a loss to understand how you accomplished your ruse so successfully.”

“Ha! ha! ha!” laughed the scout. “Why, it was all very easy done. In the fust place, I met yer frien’ Dickens and two of his Ingins out here, and arter a few minits hard fi’tin’, I ’ceeded in saltin’ the pile down—”

“You killed Ralph Dickens?” interrupted Henry, with some emotion.

“Wal, I guess I did, o’ld boy; couldn’t help it. Done it in self-defense; the devils pitched onter me like Bengal tigers, and then I went in onter ’em with a vengeance. Arter I’d laid ’em out ter cool, I shuffled on and soon I hearn a loud jabberin’ o’ red-skins, and knowed somethin’ war up; so I slipped up, and ter my surprise I foun’ out you war a “cap.,” and war to have yer ha’r lifted. As thar war a’most too many reds to make a dash onter, I concluded ter play a trick on ’em, and draw their attention till I could slip in and give you a lift. So back I went to whar the body o’ the renegade war and dragged it down to the river whar I found a canoe. Now, as Dickens war a good-lookin’ chap, I thort as what I might pass him off as myself, and went to work and dressed him up in my best cap and shirt, and fixed him up in the canoe and sent it adrift. Then I crept along the bank to see how the charm would work, and I found it was a genuine success; the reds

thort they had a soft thing o' it, and went like li'tnin' fui the drowsy boatman. The rest you know. You're all right, but my huntin'-shirt and spike-cap—wal, they're gone, thet's all."

Henry Eustace was silent for a moment, then he asked:

"Strategy, have you told me every thing you did in carrying out your ruse upon the red-skins?"

"Why, lad, my mem'ry's good as it ever war," the scout replied, avasively.

"But did you not hear a voice singing when the canoe was drifting down?" Henry questioned, with some curiosity.

"Guess as what I did hear a score o' reds singin' around a chap 'bout your size."

"But did you hear no other?"

"Did *you*?"

"Yes. I saw the figure in the canoe and I was positive that it was you, not by the familiar clothes, but by the voice that came, apparently, from the lips of the boatman engaged in singing a song that I have heard *you* sing before."

"Really! it must have bin the voice o' the Hidden Spirit, the same that uttered that horrid scream and frightened the red-skins away—their evil genius, old boy, their evil genius."

Henry gazed upon the scout as though he doubted his assertion, for there was something in his language that showed, plainly enough, that he was evading the direct answer, and he at once changed the subject, hoping that the future would reveal the scout's secret.

By this time it had grown almost dark. The scout and the hunter secreted the red-skins' deserted arms, and then moved on toward the settlement, which they expected to reach ere midnight.

Their course now, after leaving the Sweetwater several miles behind, lay along the Platte river, but, on account of young Eustace's condition, their progress was slow and wearisome. Had a canoe been at their command they could have moved along much easier and more rapidly, and they would not have been exposed to so much hidden danger, for they had gone but a few miles when they discovered that their footsteps were being dogged by a party of skulking red-skins, who, now and then, they could see gliding, like shadows, from tree to tree. Thus, our friends were compelled to feel

their way with extreme caution, lest they should run into an ambuscade.

While the scout and hunter were moving along, the latter suddenly uttered an exclamation of wonder and surprise, and pointed toward the southern sky, where he had discovered a dull red light.

The scout shook his head ominously, for in the glowing light he read the fate of Ambrose Harper's cabin, and at once communicated his fears to Henry.

"For God's sake!" exclaimed the young hunter, "let us hurry forward."

"*Hark!*"

At this juncture the light dip of an oar was heard in the river, and, peering out upon the moonlit stream, they discovered a canoe containing two Indians coming from the opposite shore directly toward where they were standing.

"They are going to land," whispered Henry.

"Good! and by old Crusoe we'll charter that craft!" replied the scout.

The whites crept to the edge of the bank and crouched down in the grass.

In a few minutes the savages landed, and, having made fast their canoe, moved away into the forest.

Our friends waited until their footfalls had died away, then they arose, stepped down the bank into the canoe, and in a moment more they were gliding noiselessly down the stream in the shadow of the bank.

Their progress was much faster than on foot: still they could not outdistance those shadowy forms that dogged their steps.

Henry watched the light before him with the deepest interest, while the scout plied the oars with the utmost silence and energy.

Suddenly their ears were greeted by a sound resembling the click of a gun-lock. The scout ceased rowing and bent his head in the attitude of listening. But all was silent as the tomb.

"I swow, I thort I hearn the click o' a gun-lock, but I guess it war only a touch o' imagination," said the scout, seizing the oars.

"No, I heard the same noise," replied Henry, "and it seemed to come from that leaning tree just ahead of us."

The scout leaned forward and scrutinized the depths of the foliage but saw nothing, so he drove the canoe forward again.

"Nothin' in that tree, thet I kin see," the scout said.

Before Henry could reply, the canoe was under the leaning tree, and before it could pass out from its deep shadow, a hand was thrust down from the tree before our heroes' eyes, and a familiar voice cried out in a whisper:

"Halt, dar, ole friends."

It was the voice of Scip, the Black Hunter!

"Ay! Scip, old boy!" exclaimed the scout, in an undertone, steadying the canoe, "gone to roost here, eh?"

"Hist! ole frien'!" commanded the darkey; "dar's danger below. Jis' look through the foliage and tell dis nigger what ye can see."

The scout and Henry parted the trailing boughs and glanced down the river, as requested.

"Wal, I see somethin' down thar, sure as shootin," said Old Strategy, "but I guess it's nuthin' but some floatin' brush or the like."

"Dat's it, 'zactly!" replied Scip, excitedly, "and dar's a Ingine behind ebbery bunch o' dat brush waitin' fur something—'spects as what it's yer scalps."

"Horrors o' Gotham!" exclaimed Old Strategy; "if thet's the case we'd better haul up here, Hank, old boy."

"Yes; and be quick, friends, for de debil am to pay to night; massa Harper's cabin's burnt, and de poor young missis is gone—de good Lor' only knows whar, and dis chile's reputation's done gone."

"What's gone with your reputation, Scip?" asked Henry.

"Oh, good Lor', massa Hank, de young missus Harper war placed under my 'tection and de Ingings come in and steal her right out from under my nose."

"Gracious heavens!" exclaimed Henry Eustace, springing from the canoe upon the log, "let us not tarry here, Strategy—Edna *must* be rescued!"

"Easy, Hank, old boy, easy," exclaimed the scout, rising to his feet and placing his hand upon Henry's arm, "we've got to

give em red-skins the slip before we leave here, or they'll give us some trouble. You see they're 'spectin' us down in the canoe and hev set a trap accordin' to catch us; and if we shouldn't make our appearance below this tree soon, they'd know to onct that we'd made our escape here, and then they'd feller us and maybe git us into some diffikilty."

"I hope you don't propose to run the risk of getting away in this canoe, when we can escape from this tree much easier, do you?" asked the young hunter.

"No; but I want to fix a ruse so that we can hold the attention of the red-skins upon the canoe till we 'scape from the tree."

"But how will you do that?" asked Henry.

"I'll show you in a minute, if you'll loan me your coat and hat to dress a *wooden* man with."

"Of course I will," said the young hunter, doffing his coat and hat. "I can go bare-headed and bare-backed as well as you, my old friend, if it's necessary for our good."

Old Strategy took out his knife and cut a bough from the tree, and setting it upright in the canoe, the brushy end downward, he wrapped Henry's coat around it, then placed his hat upon the top, thus completing the figure of a man seated in the canoe.

Having finished the ruse, old Strategy sprung from the canoe upon the tree and allowed the craft to float out from under cover of the foliage and down-stream at the will of the current.

"Now, boys," said the scout, "let's git out o' this."

So saying the trio took up their weapons, and crawled silently along the tree until they reached the bank. Then before moving away they took a glance at their situation.

The canoe with its ruse was still floating some distance above the concealed Indians, who had not yet discovered the deception of the coat and hat. Finding their way was open for a safe retreat, they at once set off. As they moved along the Black Hunter gave his companions an account of his adventures—of the attack upon Harper's settlement, the burning of Harper's cabin, his struggle with the red-skin in the forest and the silent and mysterious disappearance of Edna. When he had finished his narration Old Strategy shaped their course of pursuit accordingly, and then they moved on quickly.

CHAPTER X.

RECKLESS ROLL IN A RAGE.

NIGHT again at the robbers' ranche. Lights are flashing in the concealed chamber. Words are high, oaths loud and deep. Clinking glasses, shuffling cards, rattling dice are the sounds of the usual pastime of the robber band.

Roland Rashleigh is there, but he takes no part in the wicked sport of his men. But with darkened brow, upon which is written "defeat," he paces to and fro across the floor in deep thought, now and then clinching his fists and grinding out a terrible oath of revenge.

The robbers were too much absorbed in their games and liquor to pay much attention to the trouble of their captain, but suddenly, when he halted in the center of the chamber and gave vent to a loud oath, all eyes were turned upon him.

"What now, Captain Roll, you are in a stormy mood?" asked Belzy Trott, one of the heroes of the *pet* bear.

"What *now*?" hissed the captain. "Why, the devil's to pay!"

"Humph! that's nothin'; you're allers owin' his Satanic Majesty," replied Trott.

"Yes, and it always comes by my trusting my affairs to such cowardly louts as you are."

Belzy Trott and Zeke Teters exchanged glances as their minds recurred to their late adventure with Henry Eustace.

"Now," continued the captain, "I want every mother's son of you to prepare yourselves for business to-morrow. I don't propose to trust my affairs in the hands of Ralph Dickens and the cowardly red-skins any longer, for, whenever they are mostly needed, they're away somewhere else."

"But how about the gal, captain?"

The robber captain's brow darkened and his eyes flashed like living fire.

"The girl! fury take the wench," he exclaimed, "I have had her in my power since I left here, and she gave me the slip, and then stole the horse almost from under me and made her

escape. But, I'll have her yet if it cost every one of your lives, and then I'll take her through a general taming process. There is one thing certain: we have not got that white-faced puppy, Henry Eustace, to contend with."

"There—there, captain," exclaimed Zeke Teters, "you're just as badly mistaken as though you'd burnt your coat: Henry Eustace is not a prisoner, but as free as you are."

"See here, villain!" roared the captain, "don't trifle with me or I will tug your ears right here!"

"All right, captain," replied Teters, "but, as true as you're a born sinner, Henry Eustace is not a prisoner."

"How know you that?"

"Because, Trott and me see'd him."

"That's so, captain, by gor it is," responded Trott.

"Then why didn't you shoot him down?"

"The reward, captain, we thought we'd git that, so we concluded to capture him alive—"

"And allowed him to escape—to whip you both!" the captain exclaimed, savagely.

"No, by gor," replied Teters, "he escaped, that's true; but if six friendly Ingins and a big pet bear hadn't come to his rescue, we'd marched him off without ceremony. In fact, we come darned nigh lickin' Ingins, bear and all, and would, if it hadn't been for Belzy breakin' his knife in the bear's side."

"Terrible affair!" sneered the captain. "I doubt if you ever saw a friendly Indian or a pet bear."

The two adventurers exchanged significant glances.

Throwing himself into a chair, the robber captain swallowed a glass of brandy, and then turning to one of his men, asked:

"Stokes, hasn't Snaky returned from the Sweetwater yet?"

"Not as I've seen," replied Stokes. "He's had time, it's a fact, to be back, but I expect Sherwood's away somewhere and he's waitin' on him."

"That's it; waiting is what plays the devil with all my calculations. If all the machinery would work in unison, I would have no trouble, but when one thing is set going, another has got to stop. Hereafter, however, I calculate to depend on no one, and if there's any loose screws I will know where to find them. As to Dickens, I shouldn't wonder if I have some trouble with him and his Indians, for I upset his trotters the

other night in a very systematical style, and I presume it will warm his blood toward me."

At this juncture the door at the entrance swung open and the outside guard cried out, in a stentorian voice :

"A messenger, captain, from the Ingin village."

"All right. Show him down," returned the captain.

The guard closed the door and returned above, and in a moment more he ushered a stalwart half-breed Indian into the presence of Captain Rashleigh.

"Well, Choc," said the robber captain, addressing the half-breed, "what news have you for me?"

"Good," replied Choc, handing the captain a folded paper.

Rashleigh opened the message and read :

"CAPTAIN RASHLEY—I've the pleasure of informin' you thet the gal is in the village and in my power, and if you've got a thousand dollars to pay for that lick you give me t'uther night, besides the reward, you kin hev her; if not, she'll make a nice ornament for my lodge. Come tu onc't. RALPH DICKENS."

"That is good news," said the captain, "but I'll be hanged if that is Dickens' handwriting; that's certain. However, it must be. That *lick* he speaks of might have unnerved him, and I'll go at once."

So saying, the robber captain thrust the paper into his pocket, donned his coat and hat, and in company with the half-breed left the apartment. In a few minutes they were galloping down the mountain road toward the Indian village.

At daybreak they entered the village, and drawing rein before the chief's lodge, the robber captain dismounted, and giving his horse into the care of a servant, entered the tent. He was somewhat surprised to find Dickens absent, and his place occupied by his second in power, an Indian chief of some notoriety.

Upon inquiry Rasleigh found that Dickens was absent, and could not return for several days, but the chief in whose presence he stood had been appointed to make the negotiation with him in regard to the captive maiden.

The chief soon made known the terms upon which he would give up the captive, and as Rashleigh knew it was useless for him to attempt to induce the chief to deviate from the one price, he handed over the required amount in gold.

This done, Edna Harper, pale and sorrowful, was led into

the presence of the triumphant demon—placed upon the back of a pony, and carried away toward the robbers' ranche.

When they were fairly upon the road, Rashleigh began a tirade of abuse and threats upon the weeping girl, who heeded not his taunting words, but tried hard to overcome her weak emotions before her strength should entirely fail.

Edna was naturally a brave woman, but her reverses and misfortunes had fallen upon her so suddenly that it required some time to regain her usual courage and strength. This fact Rashleigh knew, and in the present case he made every endeavor to keep the advantage of her defiant spirit.

About sunset they reached the robbers' ranche, and giving the animals into the care of one of his men, the robber captain conducted his prisoner into the cabin and up into the chamber where his daughter, Miriam St. Clair, and her child were imprisoned.

"This will be your home for the present, Miss Harper," the captain said, leading her into the room, "and my daughter here will be company for you, and there are books that you can read. Your meals will be brought up to you, so you need experience no trouble nor uneasiness."

So saying the villain left the room, closing and bolting the door after him, and hastened down to the secret chamber where he was welcomed, not only by his comrades, but by Alf Sherwood, the robber chief of the Sweetwater ranche.

"So you received the message I sent you, Captain Alf," said Rashleigh, shaking his friend's hand warmly.

"Message?" repeated Sherwood, "what message? I received none from you."

"Didn't Snaky, my half-breed messenger, deliver a note to you from me?"

"No. I have not seen your messenger. I came here without summons from any one."

"It's providential that you did come, for I've something of importance to communicate to you; but I fear some trouble has befallen Snaky, and in case there has, it will stand us in hand to keep on our guard should the message he carried fall into the hands of our enemies."

"Perhaps it would be prudent to send out scouts in search of your messenger," Sherwood suggested.

"If I hear nothing from him between this and morning I will. But, come with me; I've something to say to you privately."

Arm in arm the two robber captains walked to the further end of the cavern and seated themselves. Rashleigh opened the conversation.

"To come right to the point, Alf, the fact is that I have seen Harry St. Clair in flesh and blood. He is in disguise and in the immediate vicinity of this ranche, and has no doubt got wind of Miriam's being imprisoned here. If so, he will give me trouble if she remains here much longer, and the only way to guard against that is for you to marry her and take her away immediately."

A devilish smile passed over the brutal features of Sherwood as he replied:

"You are talking like a sensible man now, Roll; I've been waiting three years to hear you say them few words, and you may rest assured that I will not let a moment pass without improving it. I am ready at this moment for the ceremony, and—"

"But there is no one here qualified to perform the rites," said Captain Rashleigh.

"Couldn't you manufacture a priest or missionary out of some of your men?"

"I could, but then Miriam knows every one of my men, and it might not prove a healthy wedding for you should she find out there was some sham about it."

"Then I'll go after Father Lucas at once. I'll be back to-morrow evening."

"Good!" exclaimed Rashleigh; "and we'll have a *double* wedding, old friend."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Sherwood, "you are a gay boy cap., and deserve much of this world's good; however as we mean business, I must not tarry here, so good-night, captain."

"Good-night and safe return, Alf."

With this short interview—in which they had plotted much evil—the robber captains parted, Sherwood leaving the ranche, while Rashleigh returned to the room where Edna and his widowed daughter were confined.

"He found them engaged in conversation, but when he entered they became silent.

"You seem much refreshed, Miss Harper," he said, with a sinister smile upon his lips.

"I forgot my weariness when I saw what a noble companion I had found in your daughter," Edna replied, with all her old-time spirit.

"I am glad to hear that, Miss Harper," said the robber chief, "and am happy to inform you that to-morrow evening I shall make you my wife. And you, Miriam, will also be wedded to Alf Sherwood. Sherwood just left here to bring Father Lucas, the Jesuit missionary, to perform the ceremony; consequently you will both hold yourselves in readiness for the happy event," and before either of the captives could make a reply, the robber turned and left the room.

The moment their persecutor was gone, Miriam sunk upon her knees and burst into an agony of sorrow.

"Oh, my God! so soon, so soon! I can never marry that villain; something tells me that my husband lives!" she sobbed, her soul overflowing with grief.

"We must not give way to sorrow, Mrs. St. Clair," Edna said, consolingly; "it will only add to our wretchedness and trials. There is some mystery about your life which makes your burden of sorrow heavier than mine, but try your best, dear lady, to overcome your emotions. It is a long time until to-morrow evening, and if we will go earnestly to work, we may effect our escape from here."

"Impossible, Miss Harper," replied Miriam.

"Nothing is impossible, Mrs. St. Clair. I have already seen a possible chance of escape, but it will require strength and silence to accomplish it."

The face of the widow brightened. It was the first time in four long, long years that she had heard words of cheer, hope and encouragement spoken in her ears, and they fell like oil upon the troubled waters of her soul. Her long imprisonment had reduced her physical and mental strength to that of a child; consequently, she was quick to gather joy and consolation from her brave and beautiful companion's kind and encouraging words.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WIDOW'S STORY.

It was pitchy dark without, but a bright light burned within the prisoners' room in the robbers' ranche. Little Harry St. Clair had prattled himself to sleep, and his mother and Edna were seated by his bedside conversing in a low tone with as much familiarity as though they were sisters.

"Yes, Edna," said the widow, pointing to her sleeping boy, "if it had not been for my child I should have been wicked enough to have taken my own life long ago."

"Then your child has been a blessing to you, Mrs. St. Clair, though I know not how great has been your suffering," replied Edna. "For one so young and sensitive as you, surely heaven has something better in store. I know not what makes me think so unless it is inspiration; and your child, dear lady, has enlisted my attention greatly, for his eyes and his features resemble those of some one that I have seen, but where and who I can not remember, and the more I try to think, the more my memory becomes confused."

"Please, Edna, do not allow a single thought in my behalf to trouble you. But, since you have taken such a deep interest in my welfare, I shall make known the troubles of my past life to you, and perhaps it may be of value to one or both of us hereafter."

"Yes, dear Mrs. St. Clair, tell me, by all means. There is great consolation sometimes found in telling over one's trials and troubles."

"Well, I shall touch briefly upon the ups and downs of my life, and if at any time I have committed a wrong in the past, I hope heaven, who has seen fit to afflict me, will forgive my transgression, and fit me for a better life. But, to my story:

"At a period beyond my remembrance, I was deprived of my mother's love and care by death, and then I was placed in the hands of a widowed lady until I was twelve years old

when my father again took me back to preside over his household.

"A short time after my return home, father had a difficulty with a young man named St. Clair, in which he fancied himself grievously wronged, and swore a terrible vengeance upon him. But, before he had a chance of retaliation, he was drawn away to California by the great gold excitement, and I was placed in the care of my widowed foster mother. Time passed by and father sent word to me that he never expected to return home again, and instead of sending for me, he told me that I would have to shift for myself. Of course that cruel neglect wounded my young heart seriously, but I eventually overcame the blow and determined to go out into the world and do for myself, since my father had ordered it to be so.

"At the age of eighteen I married Harry St. Clair, the man whom my father hated so bitterly. I loved Harry dearly, and since father had written that he would never return to the States, I had no fears in marrying even if he did consider Harry an enemy. But, we had been married scarcely a year when I received a letter from my father full of threats and abuse. He said that before another year passed over my head I would be a widow—that he had sworn that he would take Harry St. Clair's life, and he was determined to fulfill his oath.

"No one, Edna, knows the fear that preyed upon my mind during the following year, not only for the life of my husband, but the babe that had been given us, for I knew that my father was a desperate man and would not hesitate to slay my child should his vindictive and revengeful spirit lead him to take the life of his father. However, the year passed by and I neither heard nor saw any thing of my heartless parent. In the mean time my husband had offered his service to the government as a soldier to fight the Indians that were making the overland trail a trail of blood, and was given the commission of a captain of volunteers, and was stationed at Fort Laramie on duty.

"Had I been alone, I would have accompanied him, but I had my young babe to take care of, so I remained at home with Harry's mother, and waited and prayed for his return.

his "Scarcely a month, however, had passed, when I received a note from Harry—which had been written by a comrade—bidding me bring my babe and hasten to the fort, as he had been wounded in a fight with the red-skins and was not expected to live. Had I not become so terrified by the news and taken a second thought, it might have served me many hours of sorrow; but, as it was, I was deaf to all other protestations save that of my dying husband, and with little Harry I hastened to Independence, in Missouri. Had I waited there a few days I might have gone to the fort with a military escort, but I could not wait, so I set out with a small party of emigrants, their guide, a villainous-looking wretch, promising to see me safe at Laramie.

"Our journey was a slow and tedious one; however, we pressed on. The evening before the day on which we had expected to reach the fort, we camped in a small ravine in the open prairie. Stationing our guide on guard, we retired to rest at an early hour, hoping to sleep off our fatigue and gain strength for the morrow's journey. But, alas! At the dead hour of night a band of Indians and white men, dressed and painted as such, dashed in upon us with a terrible yell. What became of the emigrants I have never learned, but I and my child were taken prisoners, and after several days' journey we were placed in this very room.

"A few minutes after our deliverance here, to my surprise and horror, I was confronted by my father. Then I learned how I had been deceived. My father was the leader of a band of robbers that made their head-quarters here; he had learned the whereabouts of my husband, and had written the letter containing the false news of my husband's illness, and succeeded in leading me into his power through the aid of our guide, who was none other than one of the robber band, sent out expressly to lead us into the snare set by my father.

"I begged upon my knees before my father to be released, but he only scorned my petitions, and told me he had other arrangements for my future life—that I was to be the wife of one Alf Sherwood.

"‘You knew,’ said my father, ‘that I hated St. Clair, and without consulting my feelings you married him, and for your folly you must now suffer the consequence. As to St. Clair

I calculate to wring his heart with sorrow, and then lead him into a snare as I did you and fulfill my oath of vengeance.'

"Never until then, Miss Harper, did I think my father possessed of the heart of a demon; but now I know it. From some reason, I can not think that I am the child of such a wretch, and in my heart I disown him as a father.

"Two years passed by—two years imprisoned in this room, Edna—when one day a paper, published in St. Louis, was handed me by my father, in which I read an account of the murder of Captain Harry St. Clair and several of his men, in the vicinity of Fort Laramie by the Indians while they were out upon a scouting expedition. This report was soon confirmed by my father giving me a gold ring—which I readily recognized as one I had given my husband before our marriage—and a likeness of myself, which he said he had obtained of an Indian who had taken them from Harry's dead body. It was all true beyond a doubt.

"God only knows what I suffered in the next six months from the effects of this news. I only wonder that I survived it at all. Since the death of my husband, as a prisoner, I have been kindly treated. My wants have been amply supplied, and I have become somewhat accustomed or reconciled to my life of incarceration. In fact my child has been a source of great consolation, for I never look into his eyes but I can see the loving and magnanimous soul of his father looking from their depths. But oh, my God! if I am compelled to marry Alf Sherwood the old wound will be opened afresh—my sorrow and misery will be tenfold greater! In the society of my child, I would have been willing to spend the remainder of my days here, at least until he should have grown to manhood, and been able to assist me."

"Then you have not the revengeful spirit possessed by your father, dear lady?" said Edna.

"No, no, Edna, I could not think of harming a hair of his head."

"Then you are surely not his child, for it's impossible for an angel to be the offspring of a demon; besides, you do not resemble each other in form or feature. And do you never think, dear lady, that your husband might possibly be living?"

"Yes, Edna; my heart often tells me so, but then when I take into consideration all the circumstances connected with his reported murder, there is but little hope left."

"It may be the case, Mrs. St. Clair, but from some reason it has seemed to me, since I heard your story, that there is much of sunshine in life for you yet."

"Oh, you give me courage, Edna, you give me courage!" the widow sobbed, with the light of hope and joy beaming in her tearful eyes. "Perhaps heaven has sent you here to lift my burden; and oh, if we can only escape from here ere to-morrow night, we will be saved!"

Edna turned, and walking to the little window looked out. The whole heavens were overcast with a dark cloud, and away off along the horizon the faint glimmer of electric flashes were seen, accompanied by the dull rumble of thunder.

"My dear lady," said Edna. "There is not a doubt but what we can escape if we only determine to do so. There is a heavy storm coming up which will aid us greatly, though we will have to expose ourselves to its fury."

"Better, far better, die by the will of God, than suffer death ten thousand times at the hands of these robber captains," said the widow, growing strong with hope.

"How high is this window from the ground, Mrs. St. Clair?" asked Edna.

"About twenty feet, but the great trouble is, that it is directly over another window where a man is always kept on guard."

"This window is our only chance of escape, my dear lady, and if we attempt it, probably the storm will prevent our being discovered by the guard. Shall we make the attempt, or not?"

"By all means, Edna, though it will be a terrible risk, but I am determined upon a desperate stroke for my freedom, and I feel fully strong to carry out my determination."

Not a tear dimmed the eyes of the beautiful women—not a pang of sorrow rested upon their hearts now. They thought only of freedom; and the firmness of their voices, the flashing of their eyes, showed their unwavering resolve.

No time was lost in making the necessary preparations. A couple of woollen blankets were torn into strips, braided and

made into a rope-ladder of sufficient length and strength. This labor occupied some two hours, but by the time it was accomplished, the storm was howling through the mountain and around the robbers' ranche like an enraged demon.

Dropping one end of the rope-ladder out of the window to the ground, the other end the prisoners made fast to a beam overhead. All was now ready for the trying ordeal.

It had been arranged that Edna was to go first and take little Harry as she was the strongest, and when she reached the ground Miriam was to follow.

The child was aroused from his slumber and made to understand their intentions, and was instructed to keep perfectly silent. The little fellow seemed to comprehend the object in view and caught up the spirit of the dangerous undertaking with all the courage of a little hero.

A shawl was wrapped around each of their shoulders, and then in a low and solemn voice, Edna said :

"We are ready, Miriam !"

"And may Heaven assist us," breathed the widow.

Edna turned, and creeping through the small open window, stood out upon the ladder in the beating storm. Miriam was in the act of handing little Harry out to her, when she heard some one ascending the stairs.

"Spring back, Edna !" cried the widow, "some one is coming up here !"

Quick as a thought Edna sprung back into the room and closed the window. Their first attempt had been foiled.

In a moment more the ascending footsteps had reached the door. A key was placed in the lock and turned, the door swung open, and Beelzebub Trott staggered into the room in a beastly state of intoxication.

At first sight of the drunken wretch the women shrunk back with a cry of horror, but they soon found that he was as helpless as a child, and a new hope took possession of their hearts as they mechanically glanced toward the door and saw it standing slightly ajar. The women exchanged glances, and intuitively read each other's thoughts.

Trott staggered to the bed, and seating himself upon it, placed his hands upon his knees and gazed about the room with a drunken leer upon his face.

"One, two, thr'," he muttered, "guess all here; cap'n told (hic) me come up 'nd see (hic) that hadn't 'scaped. Guess ye ain't 'scaped, (hic) eh? All here ain't ye—one—two thr'? No, by gor, one's gone (hic), the cap'n said thr' here—can't count but one boy an' two (hic) wemin, an' cap'n said there were thr' all together—ladies (hic) I'm Belze (hic) bub Trott. I'm guard t'nite, and drunk, too, but ye can't come't over me."

Miriam, who had seen Trott drunk before, could not refrain from smiling at his ludicrous language, while Edna turned away with disgust.

"You are in excellent spirits to-night," said the widow, aiming to test his senses.

"Ho! ho! ho!" he laughed, "eggsellent spirits in me (hic)—goin' to be big time t'-morry; Reckless Roll goin' (hic) to marry off—cap'n (hic) gay dog—told me to keep watch out—Belzy Trott's purty (hic) drunk—by gor, this here sof' bed—goin' to took a nap—all here—one, two, thr'—hurrah for cap'n Roll, he's a—"

The wretch did not finish the sentence. The words died upon his lips as he sunk upon the bed and fell into a deep and drunken sleep.

The prisoners knew that they had nothing to fear from him, and since he had informed them in his drunken revelation that he was the guard (a drunken man never tells a falsehood) they saw their way open for an easy escape.

Since it was getting late, no time was to be lost in leaving the place; so, taking little Harry in her arms, Edna led the way.

Passing out of the room, Miriam bolted and locked the door upon Trott and placed the key in her pocket. They now cautiously descended the stairs, and crossing the lower room, plunged out into the night and storm.

CHAPTER XII.

THE RECOMPENSE.

THE night was a fearful one—black, starless and wild, deafening with rolling thunder and roaring winds that swept through the mountain passes and drove the rain furiously into the faces of Edna Harper and Miriam St. Clair as they stepped from the door of the robbers' ranche.

Pausing behind a large rock to regain breath, the fugitives now decided upon the course they should pursue to get beyond reach of the robbers ere morning should lead to the discovery of their escape.

They were about to move away, when their ears were suddenly greeted by the clatter of horses' hoofs coming up the stony mountain road.

"Be silent, Edna," said Miriam; "it is only a couple of benighted robbers returning home"

The fugitives crouched down behind the rock and awaited the movements of the horsemen.

Soon they came within earshot, and Miriam started with an inward shudder of terror, as she recognized the voice of one of the horsemen to be that of Alf Sherwood.

"I say, Lucas," she heard him say to his companion, "it's lucky that I met you on your way up here. We can have the ceremony performed to-night instead of to-morrow night!"

"You seem in a devil of a hurry about that affair," said he who was called Father Lucas, the missionary.

"Well, the fact of it is," replied Sherwood, "we *are* in a hurry about my wedding, for Reckless Roll declared that he had seen Harry St. Clair in flesh and blood a few days ago, and you know if he gets wind of Miriam's whereabouts he might spoil my future prospects."

Miriam started and would have uttered a cry had not some secret power held her speechless. For a moment her brain was in a whirl; she seemed floating in the air—drifting away. But, a sharp peal of thunder suddenly aroused her to consciousness.

"Oh, my God! can their words be true?" she mentally asked herself. "Harry, my husband, alive!"

Again she bent her ear to catch the words of the robbers. After a few moments' pause she heard Sherwood's companion say:

"Yes, St. Clair is an enemy to be feared, if he is alive."

"Well, he is alive, or Reckless Roll would not be in such a hurry about my marrying his daughter. Besides, he has got several of his men and a party of Indians beating around through the woods in search of him."

"It's curious how the report got out about his being dead."

"Well it did, that's certain, and was confirmed by an old Indian bringing some of his rings and pictures to the ranche here where they were recognized by his widow."

"Does Reckless Roll think that your marriage with his daughter will prevent St. Clair from finding her?"

"Yes; for I calculate to take her off up to the Sweetwater. You see Roll has been owing me for over five years the little sum of five thousand dollars. I offer to cancel the debt for Miriam and one thousand dollars, but the captain wanted to speculate a little and offered his daughter in lieu of the five thousand. For three years we have been hanging on the difference, but to-night the captain comes to terms, and gives me the widow and the thousand dollars."

"But the widow has a child; what'll you do with that, Alf?"

"Well, if Reckless Roll wants to keep it, well and good; but if not I will sell it to the Arapahoes for a pony or two—but here we are at the ranche."

As the robber concluded his remarks, they drew rein before the cabin, and dismounting, hitched their horses and entered the cabin door.

"Now is our time, Edna," said the widow, whose soul the robbers' conversation had aroused to a desperate determination.

"Yes," replied Edna, "and why not appropriate those robbers' horses; you know all is fair in love and war."

"True, Edna, I had not thought of the horses."

"Then let us be off."

Without further conversation the fugitives approached and unfastened the horses.

Edna mounted herself upon one of them and then took little Harry up before her, while Miriam, with some difficulty, mounted the other, a spirited animal.

In a few moments they were riding down the mountain road, guided only by the lurid glare of the lightning. Their course lay over a tough, broken country, and it was only by moving slowly that they could keep the tortuous road at all.

The rain had ceased to fall, yet there was every indication of its bursting forth anew at any moment.

Hopeful of emerging into an open plain, where their course would be unobstructed, the fugitives pressed on. Presently they drew rein upon the top of a slight eminence, and looking back along their road, they beheld a number of lights moving about in the vicinity of the robbers' ranche.

"Our escape has been discovered!" said Edna, "and they are searching for us."

"Yes," replied Miriam. "They will miss the horses also, and can easily follow them up by the hoof-prints in the earth."

"Then let us move on," said Edna. "We have no time to lose."

So saying they moved on at a brisk gallop, and after they had traversed several miles they entered a broad plain. This was quite a relief, and they at once quickened their speed.

The storm had cleared away, and in the east the first streaks of the dawn were visible.

The fugitives had begun to congratulate each other on their narrow escape, when, suddenly, the sound of voices were heard approaching from behind.

Glancing back they were enabled, by the gray light of the early dawn, to see several horsemen coming toward them at a breakneck speed.

"My God! Edna, we are lost!" cried Miriam St. Clair, in a voice of despair.

"Not yet, Miriam; not yet," said Edna, encouragingly. "We will give them a race for it anyhow. Forward! Let your animal have the reins. Ride, ride for your life, dear lady!"

With increased speed the fugitives' noble animals bounded away over the plain.

Close behind could be heard the loud voice of Roland Rashleigh and his men as they came thundering on in pursuit, shouting at the top of their lungs for the fugitives to halt, and threatening them with all manner of punishment when overtaken.

But, the brave and noble-hearted women heeded not their threats and commands; they continued to lash on, speaking words of cheer to their faithful animals that seemed to have caught the determined spirit of their riders and were exerting every muscle in their behalf.

Both the women were excellent riders, and, although they were seated in the robbers' saddles, as well as upon their horses, they found no difficulty in keeping their seats.

The race became one of fearful interest to both pursuers and pursued. Mile after mile was passed over, and neither party could see that the other had gained any advantage.

Day burst upon the scene. The sun rose over the eastern hills. Its warm rays kissed the pale cheeks of the fugitives and infused a new life into their almost exhausted bodies.

Still they urged their animals on, yet they noticed that they were beginning to fail. But, they knew that the pursuers' were failing also, for already, all but two had fallen some distance in the rear.

Far away a belt of timber rose up before the fugitives.

"Oh! if we can only reach that," cried Miriam, pointing to the timber. "We will probably be saved!"

"We can try to reach it," said Edna, in an unwavering voice. "And there are some hopes of escape, for the robbers' horses are beginning to fail. Only your father's and another's hold their ground."

Little Harry, who, during the night, complained of being cold, began to grow warm under the effect of the clear morning sun, and enjoy his swift riding with childish delight.

The race was fast telling upon the animals of both parties, with but little advantage and gain in favor of the fugitives. But the timber was now only a short distance away.

Suddenly a low cry of joy escaped Miriam's lips:

"Look, Edna!" she said, pointing ahead. "There is smoke curling up among the trees. No doubt a party of hunters, or friends, at least, are encamped there."

"And it may be Indians," said Edna.

"God forbid!" sobbed the widow.

"We can hope for the best."

"Look! Oh, my God! we are lost!"

A stream with high, perpendicular banks appeared before them.

It could not be crossed, and the fugitives could not turn to either side for they were in the apex of an abrupt bend.

Upon the banks of the stream they drew rein with all their bright hopes crushed to the earth.

A mocking and triumphant laugh that sent a chill through the hearts of the fugitives, escaped the lips of Roland Rashleigh.

But it was his last. The next instant two rifles on the opposite side of the stream pealed out like the voice of doom, and the robber captain and his companion rolled from their saddles to the ground. The other robbers in the rear saw the fate of their chief, and, whirling about, beat a hasty retreat.

In another instant two men emerged from the timber, sprung down the bank, and, crossing the stream, approached the fugitives, who, by this time, had dismounted.

The men were Henry Eustace and Scip, the Black Hunter.

With a cry of joy Edna sprung forward and fell fainting into the arms of her lover.

"Edna, my love," he said, kissing her brow. "You are safe."

The maiden opened her eyes and gazed dreamily about her, faintly articulating the name of her lover.

It was some moments before she had fully returned to consciousness and was enabled to stand without support.

Her first thoughts were of Miriam. But, Miriam had walked away some distance alone, and, sitting down, burst into tears.

Edna thought best not to disturb her.

The Black Hunter had passed on to where the bodies of the fallen robbers lay, and, with the exception of little Harry, the lovers were alone, free to pour words of love and joy into each other's ears—to enjoy that holy communion of hearts.

Poor Miriam! She was thinking of other days—days

when she had been free-hearted and happy as Edna was now.

"Oh, heavens!" she sobbed. "What a terrible life has been mine! Cut off in the bloom of life from the joys and pleasures of this world by its wicked subjects. Oh! that Harry ~~was~~ alive and would come to me now! I—"

Her soliloquy was here interrupted by the sound of footsteps, and, rising to her feet and turning about, she found herself face to face with Old Strategy, the scout, who had approached from the forest unnoticed by any one.

The moment their eyes met, a light of recognition flashed in them; Miriam, uttering a joyful cry, sprung forward into the outstretched arms of the scout.

"Miriam!"

"Harry!"

Were the only words that escaped their lips, as the long parted husband and wife gathered each other in one fond embrace.

Old Strategy, or Captain Harry St. Clair, as we will hereafter know him, was the first to speak.

"Miriam, my angel wife; my days of toil and search have been rewarded."

"And heaven has answered my prayers, dear husband," the wife replied.

"Miriam, I know your suffering has been great."

"Yes, Harry, for I knew not but that you were dead; but this, Harry, is our child," said Miriam, turning to little Harry, who at this juncture joined them.

"Our child, Miriam! my child! my boy!" cried the happy father, seizing the child in his arms and pouring a shower of fond kisses upon him; "my child! my boy," he repeated, "I never expected to look upon him again!"

At this juncture Henry and Edna came up to learn the cause of so much excitement, and were introduced to the happy pair in their true names and relation to each other.

"Oh, Miriam!" exclaimed Edna. "I am so glad to see you so happy."

"And to you, my dear girl, I owe much of my happiness," replied Mrs. St. Clair. "Had it not been for your help and encouragement, I would never have escaped from my prison."

"I say, captain," said Henry Eustace, addressing his old friend, the scout, "your disguise has been a complete success. I heard much about the death of Captain St. Clair, and never heard it denied beyond a doubt. And now, if you will allow me to ask questions—"

"Certainly, certainly," replied St. Clair.

"Well, what was your object in disguising yourself so long?"

"I will tell you. About the time that my wife had fallen into the power of Roland Rashleigh, I received a letter from him through the hands of an Indian. In that letter he informed me that he had at last wreaked vengeance on me for a past wrong—that he had carried my wife and child away where I should never see them again, and informed me how he had led them into his power. He said he felt perfectly safe in telling me as much, for he was beyond the power and rigor of the law. From that I knew he was a mail-robber, hiding away in the mountain-fastnesses from whence an army could not rout them, and I knew that my wife was there, also, but where, it would probably take me years to find out. Nevertheless, I determined to make the trial, and in order to get away from my friends and throw Rashleigh off his guard, I had the report started that I had been murdered by the Indians. The story was afterward confirmed by an old Indian finding a gold ring and likeness of my wife which I had accidentally lost. I had not intended that the report should reach the ears of my wife, but it did, and has no doubt cost her many hours of sorrow.

"Plunging into the mountain forest in the garb of a hunter, and changing my voice and manner of speech as you have known me heretofore, I began the search for my wife, and after four years my labors have been rewarded."

At this instant, Scip, the Black Hunter, came running up to where our friends were, and informed them that the robber captain was not dead, and wished to speak to Miriam before he died—he had a secret to tell her.

Miriam and her husband hastened to where the dying wretch lay. He had been shot through the left lung, and life was so far gone that he could scarcely speak above a whisper.

"Miriam," he said, "retribution has overtaken me at

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last. I am glad that you have found your husband. I knew that he was alive, and that is why I wished to hurry your marriage with Sherwood. Had you not made your escape you would now be his unlawful wife and Edna Harper mine. God is just. Miriam, you have always been a dutiful child to me, but I have been a demon instead of a father. But let me tell you. I am *not* your father. Your father was a better man than I am. In your infancy I had the wicked heart to steal you from your cradle. Your true father lives at Harper's settlement.

His name is Eugene Eustace. Henry Eustace is your brother. This secret is true, as I call upon heaven to bear witness. I ask not your forgiveness, for I do not deserve it. There is no hopes for my wicked soul—I am lost—lost—

With the last word, the spirit of Roland Rashleigh, the robber captain, fled to the judgment bar of God.

With tears of sorrow and joy in her eyes, Miriam turned aside to embrace her new-found brother. At last that little band of sufferers felt that the toil was over and the recompense won.

After burying the two dead robbers, our friends caught up the riderless horses that were grazing near, and set off for Harper's settlement, where they arrived after two days' journey.

Another happy meeting now took place—meeting of parents and children who had suffered all the persecutions of a frontier life.

As to the slight mystery connected with the voice of the Hidden Spirit, it can be explained in a few words, if the reader has not already guessed the truth. Old Strategy was a capital ventriloquist, and had thrown his voice in places where it was impossible for a human being to exist, thereby striking terror to the hearts of the superstitious red-skins, and not a few times puzzling his white companions, as we have seen.

Captain St. Clair had one more trip to make to the Black Hills. It was to get his faithful "old dog," Sagacity, who proved as faithful a companion to little Harry in his—the dog's—old age, as he had to his master in his better days.

It was some time before Captain Harry could leave off his backwoods brogue, and on more than one occasion he was mildly reprimanded for calling his wife "Miriam, old boy."

The captain and his family remained at the settlement until after Henry's and Edna's wedding, and then they returned to their old home in the East, where they still reside in the midst of a great circle of friends.

Henry and Edna have a pleasant home in the West, and are the happy parents of several bright-eyed girls and boys.

Ambrose Harper resides with his daughter, and is getting quite old.

Scip, the Black Hunter, still resides at the settlement, and is looking forward to a happy life in the kingdom come.

And now, dear reader, our story is ended. I hope the moments I have spent with you have been pleasantly occupied, and that I may hear you say :

"Come again."

THE END

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Plea for skates,	Shrimps on amusements	Who killed Tom Roper,	Prescription for spring

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Hans Von Spiegel's 4th,	Daking a shweat,	Schmitzerl's philosope,	Kissing in the street,
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The squeezer,	Consignments,	Jack Spratt,	Old bachelors,
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A lover's luck,	Dan Bryant's speech,	The ancient bachelor,	The Niam Niams,
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Gashalina Ben libus,	Good advice,	A mule ride, [zers,	Music of labor,
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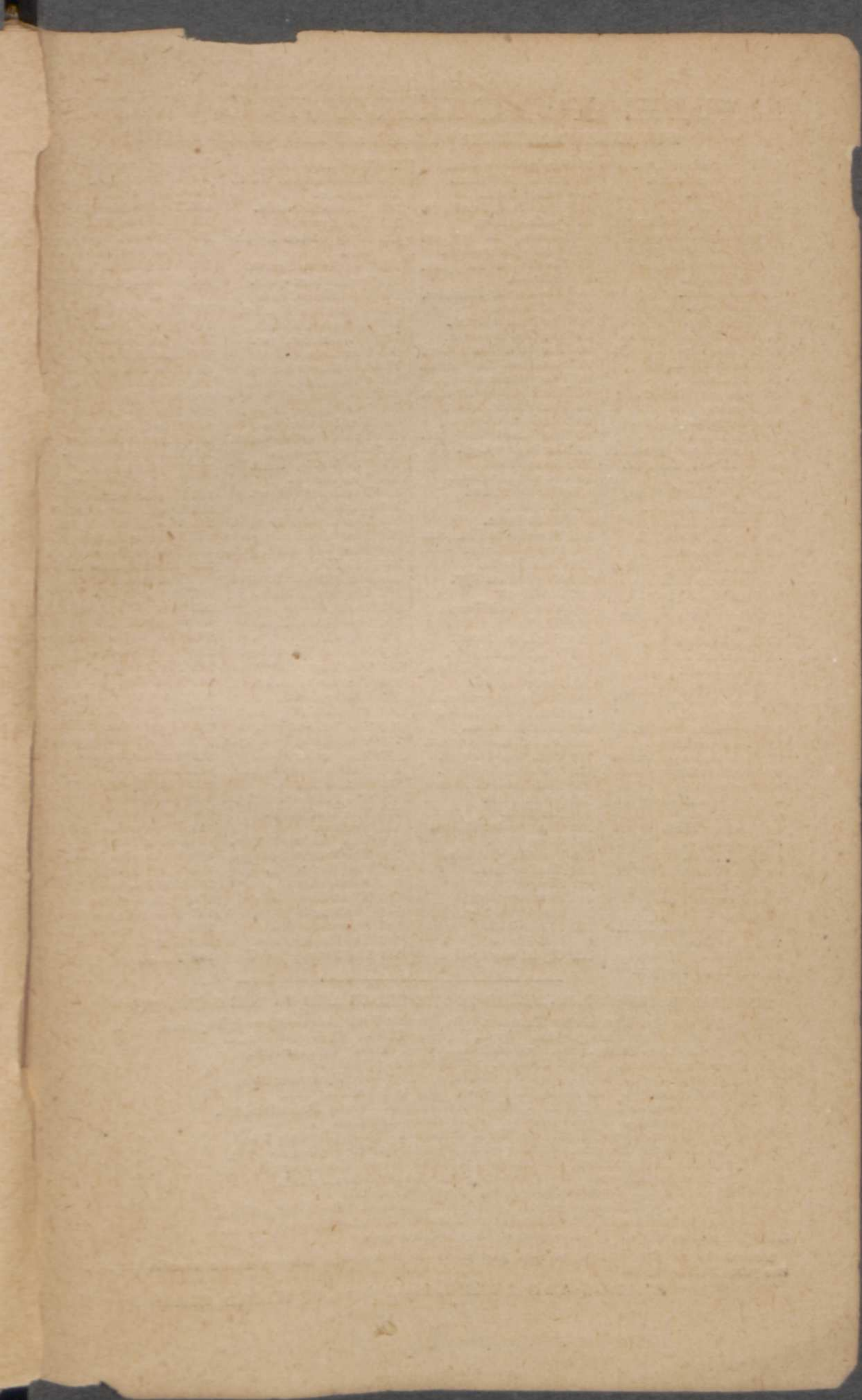
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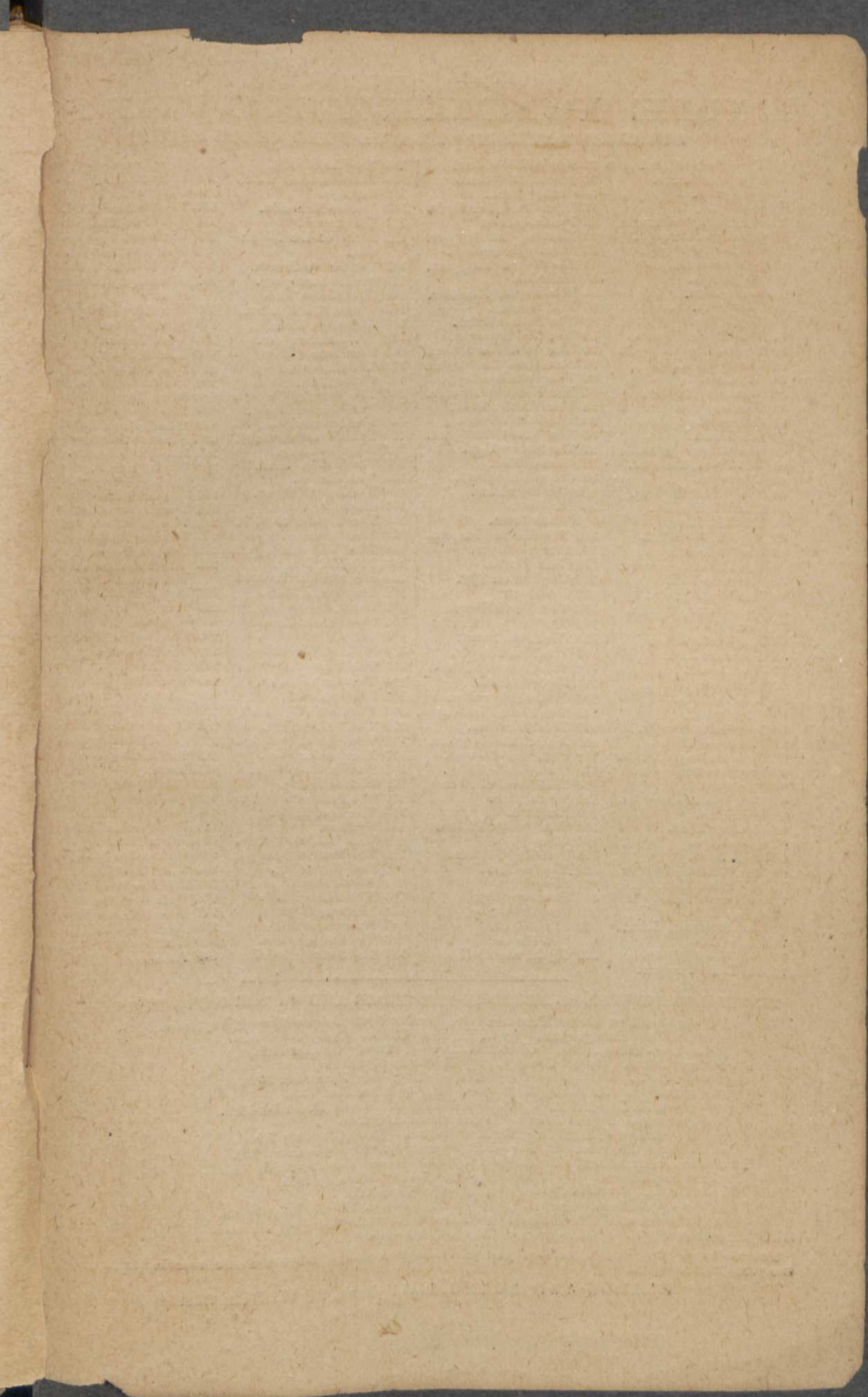
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